



Collected Poems

1976 - 2016

Brian E. Drake

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by

Brian E. Drake

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Collected Poems

Come, kiss my eyes ...

Come, kiss my eyes, invite the night to sink
Into the velvet glimmer of our breaths,
Caressing with each lash's loving blink
The shimmer of a thousand moonlit deaths;
Come, wash my lips and sponge away the dew
Of mortal earth that cloys with its trance
With salty taste of Love's own loving two,
Who tremble rapture in their private dance;
Come, sip my breath, transform it like the wine
Of perfumed songs that echo past the light,
Beyond the silent vespers that recline
On sunset's lingering glow into the night;
 And I shall kiss you, touch you, love you in
 The rainbow evening suns that we begin.

Someone

I fell in love with someone.
It took only a moment,
Infatuation, you would say,
But that is how love begins.
I know the name,
But that is nothing.
I tried to speak
But no words came to rescue me.
How I cursed myself when that
Someone walked away!
Saddened, I walked away myself
And, later,
A friend told me of
The long glance I was given
By that someone.
I have not seen that someone since.

Personals

Whatever small pride I once had
It is gone
Shrunk to hidden glimmerings
I've placed an ad
It reads

I am someone in need of affection
Love from someone
Call, write, or
Scribble your reply on subway walls
I will find it

Observation

Love is a sad and tempting thing,
Romanticized in novels beyond belief,
But we cling to that enlarged description
Like barnacles to the underbelly of a ship.
And in this clinging let us pray
That we resemble barnacles in no other way.

Rivers touch earth

Rivers touch earth
In ways we don't know
Until we're buried

Sunlight fills spaces
Between our own cells
And molecules, atoms

We skate surfaces
Proud of our grace
Unaware what we lose

Simplicity

Simplicity! Simplicity!
That seems to be the rallying cry today.
No pesky meter, no obtrusive rhymes
No words beyond four letters long
And for Art's sake, don't bother with
punctuation!
The common man don't go for all that crap.

But I've always been one for purple prose
And flow'ry lines
And strange, eldritch words
You have to look up,
Complexities that raise the hair
on the back of your neck.
That, to me, is poetry.

Midnight-City

1.

There is somewhere a city
And it is called Midnight-City
There it is always night
Lots of crime happens there
And lots of sex
And people who don't know
One another's names
Sleep together and drink
So they enjoy Midnight-City

2.

Midnight-City houses people
Who sell different dreams
Packaged in cylinders or
Tablets or liquids
And many of the people
In Midnight-City pay a lot
For these dreams
And these people Midnight-City
Embraces and loves

3.

Midnight-City also has juttied up
Big buildings like pimples
From its face, and in these
Pimples the people of Midnight-City
Work, and some sleep there
And many use the doors as beds
And piss on the walls
But this most everyone
Pretends not to notice

Club-Jenny

Hello, my name is Jenny
I am called Club-Jenny
Because I work in the Club
There are other clubs, I know,
But not for me
This Club is warm when the wind blows
And pays money when I need food
The booze is strong enough to keep me busy
And I dance when they want

Into my Club one night
A man came, Bill
He was handsome and seemed
To have a lot of money
For when he saw me he
Kept buying me drinks
And he always smiled
The Club is not a place to fall in love
And I tried hard to keep it business
But with a smile like Bill's
It's damn hard not to lose your heart
And he never asked me to dance

Club-Jenny began to dream
(I'm ashamed to admit)
Of eating real meals and cooking
And maybe even leaving the Club

And changing her name to House-Jenny
Or just Jenny, or what Bill called her
Jen

But I should have known
Nice as Bill was, he had a darksome past
Involving crime in little ways
And the money he liked to flash
Wasn't really his
In fact, there were men who were busy
Looking for Bill
And one night they found him, shot him
And Jenny danced again

Money in Midnight-City

There is money for the taking
In Midnight-City
In Midnight-City
If you're for God forsaking
There are a hundred thousand ways
For filling up your days
In this city, this city of night.

If you aren't for fancy morals
In Midnight-City
In Midnight-City
They love flexing pectorals
Forgiveness is implicit
When business is explicit
In this city, this city of night.

So drag it out and mark it up for sale
You'll find a buyer shortly without fail
Someone's ready for a bit of tail
And don't mind it if he's male
And you are also male.

There are so many ways to love
In Midnight-City
In Midnight-City
Give up the thought of true love
A bank of new sensations
For amoral vacations
In this city, this city of night.

For when the sun is gone
And Man is faced with night
You may be sure he will invent
The electric light.

Chanson's Song

She is an actress
And has done much in her young life
And while she is modern
She wouldn't mind being someone's wife
So sing Chanson's song
With viol and fife
She looks for love

In her brief life
She's known success and failure, too
And so she feels
A little happiness is due
So sing Chanson's song
On flutes of bamboo
She waits for love

The days go by
And often things go well
Then other days
The world is a living hell
So sings Chanson's song
With cimbalom and bell
She may find love

She writes her life
Just like a movie play
And acts it big
Through every living day
Sing dear Chanson's song
On the plaintive *cor anglais*
Where is her love?

Oh, my Chanson
I see you in the moon
I wish you here
With me from night to noon
So play my Chanson's song
As I play Pantaloon
She has a love

The Song of City Snow

Ah, it has turned cold now,
The summer's gone away,
And the bench-people are told how
To survive a winter's day.
The pigeon-instinct rises up inside—
They don't recall last winter,
 how many of their number died.

Ah, the snow has come now
And, dressed in purest white,
The city will live somehow
Through this virgin blight.
It's hard to hawk your fleshly wares
When you cannot make yourself
 leave the windproof stairs.

Oh, the ice has cost
The city untold millions;
The sellers forget they're lost
And dance the winter cotillions.
It is cold, and so they keep moving:
On concrete in winter it doesn't matter
 who is snidely disapproving.

The chorus who've forgot a fire's glow
Sing the Song of City Snow.

Epitaph on a first novel

When I began to write, I thought
To frame my weighty ruminations
Within rich quires of vellum, wrought
With grandly inked illuminations.

Well worthy of my intellect
Would such a vasty volume be—
But less than was its due respect:
What tome could truly honor me?

But dreaming of future praise arrayed
And how posterity would quote it,
I saw my great book's idea fade
And never actually wrote it.

I've learned that I prefer to be alone

I've learned that I prefer to be alone.
It used to frighten me, this pleasure I
Derive from being by myself: a bone
Of fearful abnormality; a sigh
Of "This cannot be right. A man should find
A woman, woman cleave to man ..." And on,
Old song. "The purpose of a life's to bind,
To be bound to." Not that a binding's wrong.
A binding can bring creativity.
And sighing so, and fearing so, I'd sit
And shiver, wonder what was wrong with me.
Why won't I, don't I fall in love, a bit?
I never answer. Answers seem to lie
Now in the sweet complacency of my sigh.

“Excuse me”

“Excuse me,” said a young man, ill at ease,
To one who obviously had little time
To listen to a fellow being’s tale,
“But I must tell you, I have done a crime.
I found a tender creature which I teased
Unmercifully with a winning smile,
Until the silly thing fed from my hand
And whimpered with real pleasure all the while.
I took the stupid beast, which only lived
Because I loved it, and I broke its heart:
I stabbed it with a hundred hateful words,
And bled it dry, and tore its flesh apart.
I should be glad. I am well rid of her.
I thank you for your kind attention, sir.”

Romance

They met, and suddenly the world was flowers—
Lilac-scented, rose- and lily-bright.
She thought him very handsome; he thought her lovely;
And they made love many times each night.

They lost track of the time, as lovers will do,
And autumn turned to winter, turned to spring.
He thought that he had never been so happy,
And gladly said yes to her in everything.

One night his sweetheart told him she was pregnant:
His love directly withered and grew cold.
He was determined to hold on to his freedom.
Her hand now seemed too fat for him to hold;

And now her squinty eyes seemed too apparent;
And now her thin lips seemed hard and dry;
And her skin seemed to sprout pimples in a moment,
Right before his unastonished eye.

“My love,” she said, “when shall we have the wedding?”
She held his arm so firm he could not run.
“My love,” he answered, “let’s not be too hasty.
There’s time enough to do what must be done.”

"I'm in my fourth month now," exclaimed his sweetheart.
"Don't wait too long or there will be bad talk."
He put his arm around her waist and whispered,
"The night is fair, my dear. Let's take a walk."

They strolled away from town and found a river
And climbed a cliff where they had once made love.
And as they stood and gazed down at the water,
He took his arm away, and shoved her off.

She fell full fifty feet. He watched her quietly
As she landed with a thud upon the stone.
Then he walked home again, and found another sweetheart,
For he could not bear to be too long alone.

A Thousand Bars

Walk into a bar, get yourself a drink,
Watch the tv, eat some peanuts, turn your ears off, think.
Order two more beers, smoke a cigarette,
Pay your tab and walk outside: It isn't morning yet.

Find another bar, have another beer,
Watch the tv, watch the people—only pretzels here.
There's yelling in the back. Some asshole starts a fight.
Drop a dollar on the bar, dart back into the night.

The streets are lit with neon
That dims the stars.
Music blasts out from the doors
Of a thousand bars.
A thousand bars filled with the roaming
Lonely men
Who sit and drink and wait for day
To come again.
The lonely men who cannot sleep
The lonely men who cannot sleep
The lonely, roaming men who creep
From glass to glass to glass ...
A thousand bars.

Newspapers

On a busy city sidewalk
At the height of rushing hours
Two pages of a newspaper
Crumpled, stained with nameless wet
Spin in endless circles
Before a wind that exists
Nowhere else but that particular corner
And the busy city people
Carefully step around the dirty eddy
Without slowing down

Boulevard Bourée

Hoy! Listen to the preacher
Preaching on the corner:
He forgot his soapbox;
No one really cares.
We think he's talking God
When we think of it at all,
But since he only uses English
Every other word
And he's always shouting
On his little corner
In his counter-tenor,
No one really cares.

Hoy! Listen to the drug-fiend
Mumbling on the corner
Litany of "smoke-smoke"—
No one really cares.
Police pay him no mind.
People learn to cancel
Out the idle concert;
"It's a city thing,"
They say if someone bothers
To verbalize the question
Why the parks all have them?
No one really cares.

Hoy! Listen to the people.
Listen to the traffic.
Listen to the sirens.
No one really does.
Because, if they did listen,
Soon they would go crazy
And join the lonely preacher
At his special task.
So is it any wonder
That no one really listens
Or bothers to attempt it
And no one really cares?

Who wants to be a nut
That gets passed by and ignored
No matter how loud he yells?

The few who have more

The few who have more, so much more that the many
Can scarcely imagine how much more that can be,
Have decided that more is not nearly enough:
More must be got, piled atop their hordes
Of much, until nothing is left for the many.

Then the few will gnaw the many bones, and justly
Snap at one another like starving, bloated dogs
And kill and eat each other, until one, strong-jawed,
Stands alone and proud and empty and insane
On an endless gray flat where there's nothing but bones.

Thursday Night after Lights Out

Katrin Maggar tried to kill herself
Thursday night after lights out.
She tied her sheet around the bars
And the other end tight around her neck,
And she jumped off her cot as hard as she could.

The women in the neighboring cells
Heard a crash, then a raucous gasp,
And the arrhythmic kicking of naked feet.
They called for the guards, and two of them came;
But the night screws don't have keys to the cells,
So one of them ran off shouting for help
While the other grabbed Katrin's feet and pushed
Her up to keep her from choking a little.

It took almost twenty minutes for someone
To locate the keys and get the door open.
Katrin was rather black by then,
An upsetting contrast to her long, pale hair.

They hauled her off to the infirmary.
Two days later, when she was recovered,
They took her to the prison shrink,
Who asked her lots of the usual questions
To get a slant on her peculiar problem.
As if there's something wrong with a person
Wanting to die when she lives in a prison.

Naked Men

There are naked men a-walking the streets,
Naked soles a-flapping on pavement,
Naked chests gone pimpled with the wind,
Naked butts gone blue with the cold.
They go up to the shops and stare in the windows,
Fix their naked hands blue on the guard-gates;
And their watery eyes don't blink, don't blink
At all; the eyewater just tumbles over
All sloppy like, without a worry.

What's the world come to, that men walk naked?
Naked in public, right out on the streets!
Is this what democracy's all about?
I thought this was a moral, upright body politic.
There are naked men a-walking the streets,
Walking around nude for the whole world to see.
Not a lick of shame, not a lick of shame to them.

Fun Times in the Dark

Dixieland jazz and a snort of cocaine
Men in leather and streets in the rain
Women with eyes and plastic boots
The *Times* and the *News* and success in suits
Movies and shows and preaching fools
Golden opportunities for breaking rules
Bags in the street with lives inside
Sirens and whistles and a paid-for guide
Joy and crime and purity, too
The whole damn place is a fucking zoo
Greed and murder and lust and fear
But we don't care—we like it here

Broad-chested men

Broad-chested men
Surrounded by broad-chested men
Thrust out their broad chests
Earned in expensive gyms
Buttoned up in expensive suits
Barely noticeable under pinstripe
Scarcely hinted at, tied up in suspenders

Broad-chested men
Mocked by prior broad-chested men
“Not so broad as we were”
“Those were the days”
“Remember Tunney Ruth Patton”
“The kids today—no width, no width”
“Width, all right, but fake width, fake width”

End of an Error

August 17, 1988: Police say an undercover narcotics agent was accidentally shot and killed by a fellow officer last night...

Whoops! Sorry, John. Your body got in my way.
There's a war on, and I couldn't stop to think,
To weigh, consider, look before I fired.
With such a bunch of evil drug-mongers loose
It's hard to tell a friend from foe these days.
Let's face it, John, in the dark all cats are gray
And on the street all men are black as pitch.

Pardon me, Mrs. John, I hope you won't make trouble
(After dear old Johnny's funeral, of course).
Johnny was always a gung-ho team-player good guy
Who understood how these little mistakes happen.
To show our heart's in the right place, we'll pay for the box.
And at the service we're going to give John a medal,
Which you can have framed (at your own expense).

Bow your heads for our friend and neighbor John.
He dedicated his life to the war on drugs
And died in that illustrious cause. Our John
Believed in God, believed in a Clean America,
And gave his life for that belief. Our John
Leaves behind a wife and child, bereaved.
Bow your heads for our friend and neighbor John.

Penny Ditty

Don't worry, my friend, it's only money,
And money, thank God, doesn't matter to me.
It matters to grocers, to taxmen, to landlords,
To millions of others; but not to me.

A nickel, dime, or penny
Ring a bitter peal as any.
They are hollow at the core.
Friend, what are friends for?

Pay back when you can. I'm happy to help you.
Eat one hearty meal before settling your debts.
The bills of the day before yesterday shouldn't
Be made the rank cause of tomorrow's regrets.

So drink when you've the thirst—
Healthy appetites come first.
If you're broke and thirst the more,
Friend, what are friends for?

You're right, it *is* pretty. I think you should buy it.
Don't fret over how it will ruin your fate—
If we all paid our bills, how would bankers keep busy?
And what would political parties debate?

Then buy what gives you glee.
Let the devil take the fee.
Indecision I abhor.
Friend, what are friends for?

Go and ring a bell

Go and ring a bell
There's a child with golden hair
Ring a bell, ring a bell

Go and kneel in prayer
There's another book been written
Not of cold critiques and theories
But a simple story of people
Kneel in prayer, kneel in prayer

Go and make loud music
There's a new eye been opened
There's another person peering
At the broad world around her
Make music, make loud music

Go and laugh like fools
There's another mercy granted
There's another cause to smile
Laugh like fools, laugh like fools

Go and make joyful praise
Praise something, anything
Prove your own existence
Make praise, make joyful praise

A Cloud at Night

There's a cloud passing by overhead
I can tell by the night's growing chill
The way the four visible stars were blotted
The way the black sky became spongy gray
Proof that a cloud is passing above
Alone on a high wind, unfelt by me
A wind that travels unseen on a far map
Evidenced only by the cloud, by the chill
By the gray, by the excised stars.

Block

Set one word on the page. Set after it
Another word—that's when the trouble starts.
Plot? Characterization? Fiction? Non?
It doesn't help to have an idea first:
The idea shifts with every word you write.
Suddenly you find yourself in France
In times of Louis Quinze. Stop for a meal,
You've traveled to Dick Nixon's slimy halls.
You sort, you plan, you outline—all in vain.
No hope for you, who wished to change the world.
No hope for you, who thought to master Art.
No hope for you, who only wonder How?
No hope for you. You are a writer now.

The Lordship of Bones

PROEM

The lines of men—the lines of my times—
The way they twist and knot, converge, bisect,
Form the face of this world—gorgeous, bold,
Impassioned and raging, ugly, dread, afraid—
That leads the body-world into the dark
With only the light of an hysterical smile
To mark its fathomed course between the reefs.
I draw the lines.

I.

AUSPICIA.

The seers knew it first, to their surprise:
The Hanged Man; Ace of Spades; a bleeding lance
Suspended in the air. At seances
The wails, for once, came not from tape machines.
And every Mrs. Helen clutched her teeth,
Raised blessed rose petals, dusty from the counter,
To shield her eyes. Most fainted, many cried,
More cackled madly, cracking jaws, shocking
The sad who'd come to have their fortunes told
But fled, fingers clawing at their ears.
Wax and blood dot pavement. Fires spurt
From no apparent source. Each Mrs. Ann
Points fingers at the shining crystal O
She bought for twenty bucks five years ago.

The crazy preachers on the curbs, who stink
And shout at studiously unlistening crowds,
Change all their sermons simultaneously.
Possessed, they speak with words they do not know,
And mispronounce them. They stand terrified
Of what they say, lancing their own eyes
With dirty nails. The little girl who skips
Her rope beside the fountain, she who dreams
Of taking men behind the restrooms as
She sees her sisters do, sprouts white dove-wings,
Soars high, coos at the preachersmen, soars low,
Is taken by a hawk. Strong omens there.
 A gingham feather falls with bloody sheen.
 In office buildings men begin to keen.

Even virgins playing solitaire
Read new meanings into hearts and clubs.
Their brothers in the factories lift bricks
Torn from the walls, and club their neighbors down;
Friends they have worked with, bowled with, club them down.
Those few left standing rip the denim back
From hairy chests and, with the heavy drills
They lately used to fashion Chevrolets,
Wrench their hearts free, sticky (don't look down),
And eat them, coughing, wondering why they do,
Then stagger to the johns to vomit, hard
And more than once, regretting what they've done,
 Regretting more what they then lose. The girls
 At home deal on while pretty chaos whirls.

Sherry hanged her cat upon the wall.
The concierge will haul it down again
And curse the kids these days. "Not that the cat
Was good for anything, the mangy beast,
But kids these days." The cat howls silent, teeth
And gums bright black and sticky with saliva,
Wearing the jump rope like a necktie. She,
Wise concierge, will pitch it in the trash
And tell Madame le Fleur her little Fleur
Is mal; get out ammonia to scrub up
The puddled pile where cat shat in its throes.
"The kids these days," she mutters at the smell,
Steps on the wet and stands. "The days these kids."
Flames spout from dribbled red. She, running, skids.

The Christ of Isenheim leaps from His cross,
Leaving chips of blood and paint behind.
Methodist congregations sit stupefied
When ornamental plaster doves flap on their wires,
Break loose, rain chalky droppings on the pews,
Causing consternation; janitors
Complain. A thousand concrete Venuses
In old ladies' gardens grow new arms
That do not fit. In a banquet room
A General with medals on his chest
Leaves peas upon his plate, shakes greasy hands
To bind the deal, and eyes the frigid dame
In taffeta who sneers and chews her cud
And lights a cigarette that will spark blood.

II. INTERREGNUM.

The mansion was vast, and never used by men.
Machines clicked in the cellars, whirred and chimed
Among themselves. Men trusted them not to fail.
And if they made mistakes—"It's only human,"
Men excused. That didn't mean a thing.
They never found if any mistakes were made.
 The place was vast and never seen by men.
 Red light, blue, white, and red light once again.

Experiments performed interpreted
Life's building codes anew. Creatures unnamed
Were born in Pyrex agar jars and barred
In sterile cages; born blind; some born dead.
Successful workers were awarded prizes,
Smilingly displayed in paneled dens
 Or at the office, boasted of in bed
 While wives and secretaries slept. Blue light, red.

A thousand million ways to have one's name
Cried out from mouth to mouth across the world.
For instance, one man married fourteen times:
Potential wives required to bear the shame
Of having birthed a bastard before they were fifteen.
By splitting her husband's forehead with an ax
 One wife, his last, achieved the height of fame.
 She later hosted a talk show to great acclaim.

Another man achieved his fame instead
By killing seven women and twenty-two girls:
He pushed a Brownie troop bus off a cliff
And watched it with his hairy arms outspread
Like Christ. Not one woman got off the bus
To stop him. He cried to see the tail-light flash
 So far below while children shrieked. He pled
 Not guilty. "I wanted to see what they'd do," he said.

A metal baboon was shown in shopping malls,
Devised by an enterprising toy firm
As good publicity. The children shrieked
And pestered parents to buy the fancy dolls.
The metal baboon was put through all his tricks,
Receiving electric jolts to make him juggle.
 (Behind the blue-bulb eyes a pulpy brain crawls
 And somewhere there a fleshly baboon squalls.)

A naked man was tied beneath a circlesaw,
Tied so tight he could not move, and gagged,
His face zipped up inside a leather mask
That left only his eyes bared toward the saw.
A woman stroked his genitals while the saw
Was lowered. This was filmed under red light
 And widely broadcast, though against the law.
 He climaxed when his belly touched the saw.

Clodia, known by other names, arranged
Her hair in white ringlets—rouged up her cheeks,
But subtly—rolled her nylon stockings down,
Removed her skirt, powdered her private place,
Left her skirt off—put in her false teeth,
The sharp ones—inserted her diaphragm—
 Blinked her white eyes like light bulbs. She exchanged
 Her mirror for the streets: Venus estranged.

Under a floorboard in a tenement
Were fifteen baby corpses, all deformed,
“But cute as buttons,” the media said, with photos
To prove it. The babies, all newborn, aroused
A nation’s sense of horror for a day
Or two. But then their flat, wide, blue faces
Grew stale (in more ways than one), and they were sent
To medical schools, yesterday’s divertisement.

Two unwinged, unlegged eagles wriggled through
A maze: professionals stood by to time
Their squirms with digital stopwatches. The bait,
A lump of gray cat food, played peekaboo:
When the birds’ beaks (all they’d left) came near,
A bell struck, light flashed—bait was grabbed away
And hidden once again. The professionals, two
Old hands at this, played gin. Lights flickered blue.

Mrs. Hoffman, attracted by a hiss
While taking out her garbage late one night,
Crept to the hedge that bordered the dark street
And saw, proceeding calmly, a basilisk.
The grass died as it passed, and died so quiet.
A block or two away a car horn bleated.
The basilisk’s weight cracked the pavement like a kiss.
Its black scales sparked. Mrs. Hoffman never spoke of this.

Victor, in his favorite velour robe
With Chinese dragons stenciled on the back
(The one he’d bought at Macy’s during a sale),
Stood looking out his glass walls, modern Job
Without the grandeur or the tragedy.
His yard was parched like old cold cream. The desert
Crept in perceptibly. Around the globe
The desert’s thousand dusty fingers probe.

The General, on vacation, took his gun
And rented dog and hiked along the shore.
He saw, out on the wave, a halcyon bird
Upon its nest and eggs. He raised the gun
And fired, thinking this some sort of goose.
The halcyon squawked, flew up; he fired again
And burst the nest. The halcyon tumbled, spun
Upon the waves. The seven-day calm was done.

III.
CONFESSIO.

“Cameras on? Good. I once killed a busload of girls
And women. Brownies and their troop leaders,
Or den mothers, whatever the hell they’re called.
I pushed the bus right off a cliff. Right down.
I’d said there was a flat, got out, and shoved
Against the bus. At first it wouldn’t budge,
But I soon got it rolling. Then, inside,
They pushed their noses up against the glass
And stared like dummies in a store. The girls
Had on these Brownie uniforms with scarves
And little green berets. The women wore
The same thing, except one of them wore pants.
I shoved off toward the cliff. It took at least,
Oh, five, six minutes to get it over. And that’s
The funny thing, see: not a one of them,
Not girl or woman, Brownie or den mother,
Got out to stop me. That’s what makes me laugh.
They stood and stared, their noses squashed against
The glass, but didn’t move.

Hell, I can’t say
I even meant to go ahead with it.
It was a crazy thing to do, I know,
But once you start a thing like that, it moves
Ahead on its own steam. You know? And seeing
Them watch me like a flock of goddamned sheep,

It got me mad. So I kept on. We hung
Up on a rock, took me a minute to work
Past that. I almost had to climb back in
The bus to turn the wheel. I wonder what
They would have done? I could have smoothed it out,
Made up some story, set it right. Easy.
I'd be home now, I guess. Well, what the hell.

My mom, she won't talk to me. She came once
To visit, but she didn't say a word.
Thank God she didn't cry, I hate that. She
Just sat and stared, that way that mothers do.
I couldn't help but think how she would look
With her nose squashed up against the glass partition.

IV.
ASCENSIO.

Drag the cross out.

“... heard the latest news?”

“The radio—”

Drag him down again, it's time
To make meaningful parallels.

“They say—”

A whispering plane out over the North Sea
Coughs—one wing crumples. Wounded, it quickly falls.
“We regret—”

“Sokrooshitye zmiya luta
So dvanadyesyatu krilami khobti—”

Drills start whining. Cards are put away,
Shelves locked up. The concierge must leave
Her old hotel; the dishes left unwashed
Attract cockroaches. Red light, blue, white, red.
A whispering plane out over the North Sea
Abandons air, explores the ocean floor,
Providing food. Trains stall to bloating crowds
Of people panicking and wanting home.
Wrens, pigeons squall like wounded planes and skid

With icy wings through smoke. The basilisk
Proceeds. A bird floats, broken, in the sea.
Again: A plane floats, broken, in the sea.
In a museum, while plate-glass windows crack,
A gentleman plays all Bach's fugues by heart
On Mozart's harpsichord.

It has begun.

Lily feeds sparrows on her fire escape.
She talks to them, but they don't understand,
Nor do they care. The bread crumbs are enough
To keep them satisfied. Across the way
Two old men, veterans, both without legs,
Sit gossiping outside a surplus store.

"Erik, I hear they're cutting rations again."

"They are. I don't know how I will get by.
I barely pay the bills. I live on stew
That comes in cans. Too many peas go down
This gullet."

"I've a sister lives down south,"
The other says, watching the child across
The way. "Could be I'll go pay her a visit.
She's got a garden. Lots of real food."

"Aa,
Too many peas, you wait and see."
They laugh.

Lily runs out of bread crumbs. She whistles
Excuses at the birds. They raise their beaks
With cynical inquiry. Two dart inside
As if, untrusting, they'll check for themselves.

"There goes that Clodia," Bert says. "She's a whore."

And Erik spits upon the front wheel of
His cart. "Waste not, want not."

"I want her." Bert
Sighs, stamps his crutches futilely.

"Too late

For that," Erik replies, a cackle back
Within his throat. "We lack the wherewithal."

"I'd be too old now anyway, I guess."

"Too ugly, too."

"You bastard, you're no prize."

"I used to stand almost six two! Or three ..."

The sparrows angrily force Lily toward
The open window. Lily smiles and stands
With arms outspread, palms up, to show she has
No more. "No more," she lisps. "No more. All gone."
The sparrows pay no heed and pluck her hair.
Her eyes begin to tear, but still she smiles.
She's never been outside the room before;
The sting of plucking at her limp blonde hair
Is mingled with a wonder of wide air.
"No more," she says, again, again, again.
The sparrows do not understand that she
Can't reach the loaf there on the upper shelf.
Her mother spanked her once for climbing on
The countertop.

"A woman. God, I thought
When it was gone all that would make no sense."

"No luck, my friend. I never told you this,
But I still dream of Marilyn Monroe."

"You sly old goat!"

They laugh. Bert stamps his crutches
With glee and horniness and unconcealed
Phallic symbolism. Erik spits
And spins his wheel, the left one, it's the one
That's set wrong and so rocks the little cart.

"The thing I miss the most—"

"Don't say no more!"

They laugh again, so hard they cry.

"No more."

Lily vainly raises her stubby hands
Against the raining birds. Her hair is gone

And will be seen in new nests, come the Spring.
The birds have ripped the plastic off the bread
And gorge themselves in relays, then return
To peck at Lily's naked skull. She smiles.
She's never frowned; she smiles. When she was spanked
She smiled. Her mother's rage increased to see
The crooked little face keep smiling.

"Oh."

The birds smack down against her white, loose flesh
And force her back.

"That baby's going to fall,"

Bert says, and looks away.

"She's got red hair,"

Says Erik, squinting. His glasses need a wipe,
But he's too lazy now. "I guess I'll have
That stew again tonight. There's nothing in
The cup."

"Not many people by today."

"And not a one to drop a quarter in
A veteran's cup."

They ponder that.

"The times

Is lean."

"Oh yes, the times, the times is lean."

And Lily totters backwards to the rail,
So short she slips beneath it. Under her
Clodia, the whore, pursues a business deal:
It's lunchtime, some accountant wants a ride.

"I've only got a five."

"Don't pull that."

"Six."

"Yeah, six."

"I found some change."

"Oh God, for six.

What is this old world coming to?" She sighs.
There's no one else, she knows, she's checked it twice—

The street is empty.

Lily's scalp drips red
No more. The blood has dried.

"Well, all right, six."

"Where to?"

"Not here, for God's sake! Have some pride!
Out on the street!"

"I haven't got much time,
I'm due back at the office in a bit.

If I come in late again I'm fired sure."

"My heart bleeds, buddy."

"Times are hard.
If I get fired I lose my ration card."

"You shouldn't try for lunch, then. Come on."

"Where?"

"The subway."

"Subway? Jesus!"

"Toilets there."

"Diseases, too."

"None you can't get up here."

The sparrows, bloated, pluck up Lily's hands
From the iron rail. Her naked feet
Bleed on the flaking paint and rusty metal.

Erik chews on a match already chewed
To pulp. He hums a song he heard somewhere
On someone else's radio. He thinks
Of trimming his long beard—it catches in
The wheels sometimes when he goes fast. Bert sighs.

"What's up?"

"Just thinking."

"Ah. Me too."

They nod.

Down in the subway Clodia and her client
Find toilet doors closed tight and bolted shut.
The accountant curses, tries to jilt the deal,
But Clodia needs that money. "Quick, in here."

“Oh Jesus God.”

She grabs him, drags him in
A phone booth, rips his pants down, blows him fast,
Her desperation almost sexual.

The man pretends she wants him just as badly
As she wants his money, and he comes
While people racing up and down the stairs
To crowded platforms and trains that never come,
Pass by outside the booth and do not see
Or even bother to look.

“We’re sorry for
The inconvenience,” speakers blare. “Due to
Emergency situations—”

He zips up.
Clodia wipes her chin and checks her lipstick;
She has to be more careful, so little left,
Just a nub inside her purse.

“Thanks. Here.”
He drops the money in her hand and runs,
Eyes on the clock.

“Hey you! That’s only five!
God damn! God damn you!”

“We are sorry for
The inconvenience ...”

“Should be getting home,”
Says Erik, shifting up. “It’s coming dark.
The streets aren’t safe at night.”

“That’s right.”
“Hey, Bert.”

Bert terns back. “Yowza?”

“Don’t forget Monroe.”
He makes an obscene gestures, cackles.

“Hell!
God damn your hide!” Bert hollers. “Now I’ll dream!”

Erik creaks away. Bert hobbles home,
Rushing to a rendezvous with sleep.

The sparrows tire and scatter. Lily sighs,
“All gone. No more.” And finally, weary, falls.
She falls three stories, and she does not die.
Not right away.

Her mother, wearing green, comes in and finds
The window open, curses, then looks down.
She looks down a long time. When the moon comes out
She pulls the yellow blind down to the sill.

Haul out the weapons. Instinct takes control:
Though nothing’s left to be shot at, a man
Feels more a man with a gun in his right hand.
Pass out the helmets and the masks. Oh, look,
The Christ of Isenheim is shrapnel-torn
And hanging upside down above a pile
Of darkening corpses. Thirty men held to
A tree with twisted barbed wire, starved and cold,
Are guarded closely by fanatics who
Press gun barrels against their brows, afraid
The dying will rise up and make attack.
Somewhere

“We’re getting warning lights”

a plane

“Malfunction”

over the North Sea

“Oh God”

V.

IMPERIUM.

On old Iona, in its jumble of holy ruins,
Churches, abbeys—more holiness per square inch
Than any other Christian place on earth—
Clodia sits upon a pillar of stone
And watches the wild mountain goats poke round
The altar stones to graze on scanty grass,
To weakly nuzzle lichen, moss, old hymnals

In search of something, something like to food.
An old ram keeps a bleary eye upon
His subjects, randy ruler of not much,
His shaggy flanks scarred and furrowed with
The medals of past campaigns, coups, rivalries;
A stinking woolen bundle of pride and lust.
He suddenly rushes in the midst of his harem
And mounts at random, to prove that he still can.
It's a mistake: it's a kid he's lunged into,
But to pull out would aggravate the error,
So he thrusts on. And the kid, bewildered, bleats.

And Clodia, bewildered, looks up at the orange sky.
There are glowing purple clouds nearing fast—
Another heat storm, Clodia fears. If so,
Less grass tomorrow, fewer sheep to watch.

In good time, without hurry, she climbs down.
She picks her way across the ghostly island
Over the bodies of starved sheep—pink, bloated sheep,
Putrescent corpses—with the dainty step
Of one born and trained to the feminine,
To the ruined cloister that she's made her home.
Behind her the ram snorts, triumphant, and the kid
Stumbles bow-legged, wailing for its dam.

Clodia lives in the cellar of the cloister.
She's made a bed of hassocks, altar clothes;
It smells of mildew. Clodia doesn't mind.
Before she goes to sleep she brushes her hair,
Her long white hair. It fills the brush with clumps.
The fire storm's begun—uncommon thunders
Above, and the panicked mewling of the sheep.
But in the cloister cellar the air is calm
And chill, and musky with old smell of earth
That Clodia thinks could never change.

She's wrong.

And when she sleeps, she does not dream. But colors
Fill her empty sleeping mind like test patterns

For stations that will not broadcast again.

She rises with the chartreuse dawn.
And in the dark (she will not light the stub
Of candle fixed to her crumbling cellar wall)
She brushes what is left of her thin hair,
Her long white hair, pisses in the next cell,
Dresses, goes back up to the face of the world.
The naked face of a world that pleads with the sky,
The oddly colored sky, "No more. No more."
She counts the sheep. Now there are only twelve.
Only twelve left. The kid is gone. The ram
Is still there, though, patrolling his borders doggedly,
Totting up his ranks with great complacency.
He still has subjects, still has ewes to mount.
And he's content.

And Clodia watches the sky
And tots up the ranks of her days; tugs at her hair;
Tosses the loose white clumps upon the grass ...
Miniature sheep. Counting miniature sheep.
Sweetly unthinking. Blessedly unthinking.

VI.

EXTREMITAS.

Step right up! Don't wait! The seats are going fast.
It's the hottest show in town, with an internecine cast!
Give in! Come on! Learn to appreciate!

It's great!
The best show since the Virgin gave birth!
It's the Lowest Show on Earth!

*And men, the men, the men are dead,
Their earth pulled down from dizzy steeps,
Their oceans stilled in mazy depths,
The mud the only emperor.
And their bones were bared with lewd malice.
Their beaten, shifted, cracked bones.*

*And the seas moved up.
And the earth moved up.
And the bones, the bones, the bones rolled down.*

Step right up! Behind this canvas flap
Are wonders man has never seen. (Pay up,
You don't get in for free.) Step up! Behind
This flap, my friends, is a solid empty world,
Chock full of nothing but some rocks and mud,
And lots of bones, white bones, gray bones, black bones,
All jumbled up in one big earthwide grave.
A mangled mess the like of which no man
Has ever seen, as ugly as your life.
Skies that are gray as pyorrhetic gums,
Mountains that look like scrambled eggs, foothills
Gone flat from boredom, plains slid to the sea,
And seas as dead as month-old mayonnaise.
And over all, the bones. The wildered bones.
There's not a single living creature there
To draw a breath and give the weeds a chance.
You take a drop of brown pond-water, fix
It on a slide under a microscope:
Nothing. Just mud.

*And men, the men, the men are dead.
And no man left to wonder why.
No man is left to question Why?
But bones lie still in muddy waste.
The men are gone from muddy waste,
With men who made the muddy waste.
And the earth is still.
And the winds are still.
And the bones, the bones, the bones lie still.*

What happened? you may ask. Kid, if I knew
I wouldn't hesitate to tell you. I
Could make my fortune if I knew it all.
Course, everybody has his pet theory.
Some say that it was war. And some say peace.
Some say God just got fed up, and why not?
And some just think the spring inside wound down.
Me? I don't know, kid, and I don't try to know.
I don't get paid to think, not about that.
You say you want your money back, old man?
Just keep your voice down. If you don't like death,
That's your tough luck. Your money's gone, old man,
The quarter's in my pocket now, and you
Are out of luck. Step up! Step right up, friends!
Step up and see the Only Show on Earth!

*And men, the men, the men are dead.
Their bones piled up in sorry piles.
Their bones slicked over in black mud flats.
Their bones a-rattle in sinkhole pits.
Their bones tumbled up in pyramids.
Their cracked, hollow, nick-knobbed bones.
And the seas are dead.
And the earth is dead.
And the bones, the bones, the bones are dead.*

Laugh

Laugh, for life is being lived
And if you've not yet found the way
Look down--it lies there, taps your feet
To set them dancing down along it
Dancing like two panting puppies
Offers music in its vistas
Waiting there ahead for your eyes
And your laughter is the guide

Anthem

Tap tap tap
That's the tramp of the roaches
In their never-ending enterprise
Of world domination.
It's a paying proposition,
As anyone can see,
And you really must admire
Such profound determination.
Oh, the vast organization
And deceptive anarchy
Will see the little bastards through
As anyone can see.

Luncheon Interruptus

No plane went down to cause their transformation:

But they were bored with backyard barbecues
And thought to spice things up—imagination
Is called Hallmark of Man—and on the news
When first reports came in, announcers groaned
And turned a pretty shade of emerald green
To speak the dreadful deeds. Some viewers, stoned,
Just giggled at LIVE FOOTAGE! on the screen
Of trussed up neighbor boy and pigtailed girl
Who'd come to mow a lawn and mind a child
But stayed as *haute cuisine*, served up with pearl
Onions poached and tossed with mushrooms wild.

How could five used-car salesmen and their wives

Turn horribly (and stupidly) depraved
As to buy cleavers, bone saws, sharpen knives
And feed upon their fellows? Ill-behaved,
To say the least. And badly planned, too. They
Took few precautions to ward off detection.
They set the remnants in the alleyway
And acted wholly without circumspection.
It's their incompetence we must abhor,
Their utter lack of sense that most offended:
They only feasted twenty times before
Authority discovered and descended.

With marked repentance, as demanded,
The cannibals, reprieved, disbanded.

How to tell

This is how you can tell who is homeless
And who is a right-earning, tax-paying citizen.
You can't judge by the teeth—even rich men get yellow.
You can't judge by the face—nice ladies get dirty, too.
But no matter how normal the homeless may look,
There's always a little something wrong with the picture;
One pant leg tucked into the old boot;
A plastic bag instead of a backpack;
A growth of beard just two days' too long;
That one extra layer when the weather grows warmer.
One little something askew in the overall,
A misplaced wrinkle, a mishandled jacket,
A stain just too large on the seat of the pants.

And do not forget that vague air of unease
That creeps up your clean limbs when you see the Homeless.
For Homeless means No Home, and that equals WRONG.
And no matter how liberal, how heartfelt you are,
That cold itch comes crawling when you hurry past them.
That cold itch that nudges and won't go away,
Like the lice on the skin of the WRONG; I mean Homeless.

And that's how you tell.

What happens when you sleep in a gutter

At night in this city
You can walk and see as many people
As you could want,
If that is what you want.

When you walk at night
You must inevitably see
The drugged or crazy or drunk
Who use the doorways and benches as boudoirs.

These people often have beards—
The women, too—
For they cannot afford razors
And they spurn conventionalities.

Concrete is hard, and a bench
Offers no protection from the rain,
And consequently the streetpeoples' clothes
Are not very clean, and certainly wrinkled.

If you wear a suit or a fashionable dress
As you walk at night,
You shouldn't talk to the wrinkled people,
For unless you give them change they will be rude.

We came to dance

At the back of the club we hear a shout
A scuffle, scream, the splash of human liquor
But the band is good
We came to dance

“Hey, look at Mary, they’ve got her hiked up
Over the Star Trek pinball machine”
But the beat is loud
We came to dance

It’s hard to keep your feet
And the modicum of grace
When everything’s spinning
Down a slippery vortex
Enough to deal with
Balance and style
Without taking on
The world for a partner

They’ve barred all the doors and fired the club
And I can’t see the lightshow through the smoke
But the band plays on
And we came to dance

The Love of Flies

He rooted through the heap of rotting waste
Sought what bite might remain untouched
By rat or dog or other hopeless human
His fingers blue with cold, how to grasp forgotten
Groped into plastic slimy with putrescence
Wiped off his chill fingers roughly, groped again

The first fly tapped at his furred ear, crawled in
The second, third, and fourth buzzed tight against his nostrils
The whirring flock of them wheeled round him, a
 winged whirlwind
He brushed at them, dropped back his hand, uncaring
He found a half-gnawed chicken's wing, blew it clean
A fly lit on it as he raised it to his mouth

More flies were come in answer to unheard summons
They crawled into his stiff, streaked, stained, cardboard clothing
Nipped at him, sipped the pungent pools of sweat
Beneath his arms, his belly, at his crotch
He grunted, slapped some dead without a thought
What thought could fit within his packed brain?

The swarming now increased with musical force
He glinted on the heap of garbage, robed in sequins
Sparkle from the countless faceted eyes
A siren somewhere—he couldn't hear it
His ears were filled, and in his black-toothed mouth
The flies worked on the chicken as he chewed

More roosted in his clogged nostrils
They practiced there the secrets of generation
Tucked up their progeny in forests of wiry hair
And more and more came down and tenderly
Blanketed the freezing, wasted man
And warmed him with their invisibly clapping wings
Warmed him, smothered him, bred in him
And killed him

When he was dead, they rose
Like a black fog, sang, and scattered sorrowfully

The Good Times

The fat man is having fun
Listening to speeches that tell him he's right.
Watching the tv, where there are no questions,
He smiles and notes What a good time this is—
My loved ones around me, quiet, respectful,
Belly full, doors locked.
These are the good times, what I have fought for.

Yes, he has fought, though his fat belies it.
It isn't easy ignoring questions,
Locking doors, watching tv,
Picking which fat men to forget or befriend.
Keeping the loved ones near isn't easy,
Keeping them quiet burns fat-building calories.
These are the good times.

This place

This is a place of hideous deformities
Deformities of limb, deformities of mind
Ugliness grown through the mere time spent living

Ugliness raised by the mere time spent living
And ugliness planned, fostered, cooed over
Whims and accidents deemed interesting

Whims and mistakes studied as interesting
Monstrous wrongs in human form and kind
Sights that terrorized our begetters

And nowadays the sights that terrorized our begetters
Are the ones we pay to see
The ones we ache to see

Lifeboat of Fools

One bent plastic paddle
And we've sprung a leak
Meg's dancing in her high heels
Georgie's getting up to speak

Sal's been pitched overboard
By the splashing of the waves
Someone's singing "Stormy the night"
Someone's singing "Jesus saves"

Most are watching wrist tvs
Ron would like to swim a bit
But his Mommy stops him "Dear
Water's slick and black—skip it"

Henry and Manuel are playing
Poker—they so like to gamble
Using heads as chips for betting
Awaiting sirens for a scramble

Dick and David and H.K.
Spin the bottle at themselves
Women aren't allowed to play
Sex is bottled put on shelves

All of us seeking a captain
“Lead us! Lead us! We’re unled!”
Water sloshes at our feet
“Raise your eyes and bow your head”

“I will lead you! I will lead you!”
Half a hundred blind men stand
And the lifeboat fills and sinks
Out of sight of land

Conventional Sentiments

For a critical week
After a friend died
After a friend was murdered
I pondered how to speak
What girded words to give
To living relations
I did not know.
How far can one go
Conveying grief?

And saying anything
Without contagious tears
Without reawakening the fears
Of that time when he was missing
Was no easy job
For a man of my
Sentimental imagination.
What words to apply
To bruised emotion?

At a time like this
Which I hope not to know again
I learned to take my pen
And prop myself up
On a Hallmark card.
Too hard to write a private word.

Much safer to sign
A couple of lines
Of italic script.

Ideal

I worship the ideal of
Romantic Love.
I think that must be why
God made the world.
Whoever dreams of angels
Kissing passionately?

Second Thoughts the Third Time

The lick of lip
The race of breath
The thrill of alien flesh unnamed
The sudden weakness of the knees
As spasm slows
 But to look into the same eyes
 Two days later

Bouquet of hands
Unmapped fields of flesh
The wild medley of strange bodies
Pumping and crying and shooting
Heaving under red light
 But to look into the same eyes
 Two days later

The silence of two
Rumpled sheets
Studied flesh, remembered pleasures
Sure ways of drawing a gasp
Able to giggle
 And looking into the same eyes
 Two days later

Villanelle

I touch your hands with wondering hands,
 Amazed by eyes I cannot plumb—
Two secrets bound in cobalt bands.

Ignore requests, despise demands;
 You turn from me with mouth made dumb.
I touch your hands with wondering hands.

But you are charting distant lands,
 Your eyes vacant and venturesome—
Two secrets bound in cobalt bands.

This doubt, like banks of firebrands,
 Has burned and left a cold, sharp scum.
I touch your hands with wondering hands

And jangle, while my dread expands,
 Those bracelets on a wrist gone numb—
Two secrets bound in cobalt bands.

I learn to give up wounded stands;
 I put away the funeral drum.
I touch your hands with wondering hands,
Two secrets bound in cobalt bands.

When all is done ...

When all is done and through on Earth's grave sphere
And emptiness called Chaos intervenes—
That moment when the darkness seems to leer
At light the fruitless net of starshine gleams;
When dust and misty vagaries conquer life,
Or bury it in seeming mounds of black
That plays itself without accompanying fife,
As though it filled some vital, burning lack;
When murk becomes the capital of light,
Initial for continuance of day—
A lamp as backward as the sun for night—
And rue becomes transfigured into ray:
 Still shall our loving rise beyond the plane,
 Outlasting petty cosmoics birthed in pain.

A Song

I will go far from this place.
 There is no friend or love here.
 There is no reason, then, for me to stay.
And I will leave in this place
 All that I ever had here,
 And I will make myself a new place far away.

 This is a lying place,
 A place of lying smiles
 Betraying every face.
 But somewhere, down distant miles

I will forget this far place.
 I will remember nothing
 But that one loving night and leaving day.
And I will empty my heart
 To make it clean for new hopes
 In that new land where I at last can stay.

Progress

I used to dream
And when the dreams would not come true
 And I was hurt
I decided I would dream no more.
But my mind fooled me, and started
Dreaming again.

Then I was hurt so bad, and hurt again,
That I thought my dreaming had died for good
And held for it a pretty funeral.
But here I am, dreaming again,
And I cannot help it.

Fanticore

The sky reared up. It was a beast
With open maw, the unhinged jaw
Wrapped round with teeth in row on row:
A grin to stop the flow of thought.
The earth cracked, heaved—a stretching spine
With widespread limbs that could span orbits.
The whipping tail was Time itself,
Scorpion-stinged, crusty-scaled
With weary eons, empty, ended.

Suns grew dark at this beast's coming.
Galaxies trembled at its cry,
Its chilling, piteous wail of "I AM!"
Sound of threat and sound of torment.
And dimensions shrieked and shifted
At the madness of its fury,
At the torture of its fury,
At its terrible, terrified certainty,
At its unrelenting "I AM!"

The Glade

Within a mountain wood there is a glade
As quiet as if earth had never spun.
The flowers, verdure, and the boughs of trees
There drip with red light from the setting sun
And move without the stirring of a breeze.

Within that silent place, well hid in shade,
The poisoned clay is heaped to form a mound.
This earthy O has slowly, in the round
Of passing years, greened, settled, sunk awry
Beneath the weight of pines and eglantine,
Gorse, sneaking creepers, weeds, and mountain flame.

The grasping foliage of that glade grows high;
And there, within that mound, the roots combine
To feed on what no longer has a name.

Time's Round

I saw a haunted face as pure and light
As any child's—no ghosted shadows there,
But knowledge of the spaces beyond night
Had blasted hope of happiness or prayer.

That face had reached time's edge and ridden the curve,
Tobogganed down the steep of space's rim.
Those eyes were deeper than that empty swerve,
And age had swallowed up itself in him.

That face had pressed against dark matter's bond
That cages us and mocks our human vaunt.
Those eyes had peered to see what lay beyond
And caught a glimpse to blight, exalt, and taunt.

I saw that face, and knew it might betray
The secret knowledge I had so long sought.
Those eyes saw me as that face moved away,
And winked at me. And then I was forgot.

Parthenogenesis

Something made of dust crept in
Beneath the door and swept toward him
Rose like scent and touched his hand
He looked down—it was gray in moonlight
A shadow thing, scarcely present
He watched the traffic outside his window
When he looked back, his hand was furred
As soft and uncompact as indecision
The softness mumbled along his arm
Leaped the distance, touched his belly
He did not stir—he had breathed
And already his mind pillowed itself
Within his skull, at rest at last
He sat back in his chair, breathed twice
In brilliant sunshine hard as tacks
A plume of dust swirled on the carpet

When all's made clear

We sit about a dish of flames
And tell old tales of mysteries:
About the man without a shadow;
About the murderer and the worms;
About the amputated arm
That creeps and strangles wandering fools.
We shiver at the lovely cracks
And scuffs that echo in the dark.

And then a deeper, dangerous sound—
Our gleeful trembling cools and dulls
To inward dread, to mazed staring.
The sky, a cracked and dusty bowl,
Is twisted inside outside in.
A tremor shakes that painted bowl.
“The moon’s gone green!” We all look up,
Dismayed to hear the stars sing loud
And crack the twisted unmapped heaven,
With song like swords. Our fire turns black.

Through that cracked firmament a huge
And desperate light breaks forth. We shriek.
We fall, our brains gone blank with awe,
Betrayed by our poor finite minds.

Rainbow Seas

Flat, unwaved, puce and fuchsia
A-glow beneath a soot-stained sun
Smooth expanse of green and gold
Shot with scuds of neon violet
Gray beneath a speckled moon
Mauve along the blackened beaches
Scummed with iridescent diamonds
Traced with filigree of ashes
 Auroric, liquid phosphorescence.
 Enchanted beauty of putrescence.

Hinton Occluded

Hinton rose aloft. His tesseract
Went with him, all its parti-colored cubes
Set flashing at the sun. Kilkenny cats
Gamboled beneath, but soon tired of the game
And ate each other up while Hinton sang
Old Celtic reels and dreamed of sexual play.

Charles Fort made note of every unclaimed fact
And sent them flying through pneumatic tubes
To where three Arlecchinoed acrobats
Juggled before Rucker's and Hawking's claim
That light bends. But the telemodem rang
And called them all to see a matinée.

Directly following the entr'acte
They left the theatre, pushing through the rubes,
And went for tea in varied habitats.
Hinton, disturbed by wind, forgot his name
And instantly the scientists, whistling, sprang
And fetched him down to join their merry fray.

Cain looked up

Cain looked up when the crows approached
knew then what they meant
gathered stones to hide his deed

The Dream of Flight

"I want to fly!" I told my grandmother.
She was washing something to eat.
"Oh, you want to fly a plane."
"No—I'll fly without a plane!"
"Dad, Brian says he wants to fly,
But wants to fly without a plane."
"What?" Grandpa said. "Like Superman?"

They laughed at that. So I learned
To keep my deep desires hidden.
I built and burnished them at night
In the dark, in my bed;
Fell asleep in them, and dreamed.

But I'd known how to fly for years:
Four years old in the top bunk
In the soft blue time of night
When all is blue, my room, my body,
Even the air—blue as the moon.
Woke up, found myself afloat.
Soared up from my blue top bunk
Buzzing like a child-buzzsaw
Body roaring with excitement
Floated down in fetal posture
To the indoor-outdoor carpet
Lay there grinning like a sneak thief
Then climbed back up to my top bunk
Waited there for new drama.

But I never flew again.

Oh, I dreamed it—dreamed of world flights
In and out among the Andes
Over hidden bits of China
Trips to Tierra del Fuego
Hunts for missing links to magic
On the plateaus of Brazil
Flights alone in empty heaven
Free of desperate childish body—
Dreamed, with my worn teddy bear
Tucked between my unworn thighs;
Loins yearning toward the future.
I told no one.

“Brian, I found
This note you wrote. A girl named Sheila.”
Mama’s voice and my face red
As Sheila’s long six-year-old hair.
“Now you know that if you give her
A valentine’s card, you’re going to have to
Give everyone in your class something.”
I had bought Sheila a ring.
I didn’t know what rings were for,
But I knew if you were in love—
I was in love—you gave a ring.
“You’ll have to give them all gifts too.”
But why? I didn’t love them all,
And some of them I really hated.
Just her. Just her. Her dark red hair.
I’d seen her naked by mistake:
Come to look at *Free—White kittens*
I’d seen her run from tub to safety
In the hall behind her mother,
White and free as any kitten—
Slip of a body, scarlet hair.

Six years old and I desired her,
Not knowing what desire is.
“You can’t give just one a present.”
If this is logic, give me flight!
I ripped up my ring-gift note
Into shreds, and pitched the pieces
Into the air, into the wind,
Watched them flutter into distance,
Fly away, a flock of dreamings
If this was love then let me fly
Like scraps and rags of broken paper.

Twelve years old, a summer away,
A long journey home alone
By plane. In my little suit and hat,
A midget man afraid to be noticed.
Propellers rumbling—a long time ago—
And when they spun, the whole plane shook,
Buzzed. I remembered. A magic roar
Filled my ears with familiar noise
We rushed down the runway, picked up speed
Rose through the muddy Texas sky—
I cried out, “No! It’s not the same!
This isn’t flying!”

They looked at me funny.

Mountains called me. If you can’t fly
Climb high as you can away from earth.
Long late plotting with a friend named Chuck
“We’ll hike away to Colorado!”
“Let’s do it! Take the whole long summer
And camp and climb!” I thought, Out there
We’ll walk together, sleep together,
Swim without suits, get dry together,
Lie naked together under bright stars

Chuck silver-haired like a new god
Me stocky (fat) but hoping somehow
I'd grow beauty. Poems had taught me
That in embrace the spirit flies.
If the body can't fly, try the spirit.
And Chuck and I would hold one another
In secret embraces I didn't yet know,
The wrestling match where everyone wins.
We'd fly off a mountaintop into cold air
He'd be afraid but I would laugh,
"Don't be afraid! This is just flying!"
But I was afraid, and he joined the navy.
I watched *Peter Pan* every year instead.
When Mary Martin yelled, "I'm sweet!
I'm sweet! I'M FLYING!" I rose with her,
Impatient with wires and harness and stagehands.
I'm sweet! I'm sweet! I'm flying!

I bought two finches and a cage:
If you can't fly, tame those that can.
Delicate bits of sky with feathers,
Caged birds, feathered tufts of fear.
But they dreaded me, they smashed
Their wings and beaks against the bars.
They died.

My mystic phase, attempts to locate
Meaning, justice, reason ... anything.
Something to ground me, make my earthbound
Time productive. Christ, Mohammed,
TM, Sufism, Ouija board, beer.
But all the chanting, all the breathing,
All the prayers and small donations,
All the talk of "All is Oneness,"
All the ungrammatical teachings—
Nothing—though they promised all—

Nothing gave me what I knew,
What I knew was all I wanted,
What I knew when I was four.

Leave it. Sex at last, the first time
Wasn't what I hoped or wanted,
Though it served to pass the time
In pleasant (sometimes tedious) manner.
Drugs? I never had the money.
Rock 'n' roll and all-night parties
Never worked to get me airborne,
And the grievous mornings after
Drove me deeper into gravity.
Work for fame; drink and scowl:
Bitter, unknown genius-type.
Feel the earth creep higher each year,
Weighing down the weakening limbs,
Filling up the eyes with mud,
Clogging up the heartblood's pipeline,
Bowels and muscles, lungs, toenails.
Ride a jet each chance that offers,
Trips to fabled distant places,
Trips back home, and back again;
Not a one that could come close
To what I knew then in my top bunk,
What I heard as I rose upward
Into blueness, into wonder
Giggling frightened longing soaring.

I want to fly. I want to fly.
Yes, Grandpa, just like Superman.
No round-trip super-saver fares
Or putt-putt model radio toys
Or outlawed or legal chemicals
Or bouncing on another body
Or living things caged up as tokens

Or even dreams—not even dreams—
Can substitute. I want to fly!
Up from my bed out of my window
Across the world and even further
Like I did before I learned
To hide behind the proper world
Where no one flies except in movies
Where no one flies but as a symbol
Where the Lord of Flies is loathed or laughed at
Where flying things are shot down, swatted
Trapped and hanged on no-pest glue strips

When I was four years old I flew,
Flew like any mythic hero.
Flew like seeds on wind, like paper,
Flew and laughed and knew my living.

And I must fly! And I will fly!
Yes, Grandpa, just like Superman!

Triolet

This lick of lip, this press of breath,
 This touch of salty flesh to flesh.
A night-exalted shibboleth,
 This touch of salty flesh to flesh.
 The smoky scent of human mesh,
The living that makes worthwhile death:
This lick of lip, this press of breath,
 This touch of salty flesh to flesh.

Now this is peace

Now this is peace: a chill fall day;
The Maine coast beaten by the sea;
A baggy sweater, cable-knit;
A rented Irish Setter;
The tranquil trust of well-known way;
Nostalgia, sweet, for what might be—
The massive novel someday writ
(Though daunted by a letter).
What might be. What was. Bothered now by neither.
The sound of surf. Late sun. No moment blither.

Credo

Where do you go when you've gone where you can
And it isn't what you expected?
When you've managed your life by a logical plan,
But it hasn't gone as you projected?
Do you forge on ahead against weathers adverse
Or retreat and gather your power?
If it doesn't get better, at least it's not worse,
For a year, or a day, or an hour.
And you might find you're able to stay in one place
By steady and powerful running,
Though the exercise wears, and to keep up the pace
You will need all your wit and your cunning.
But that's what life's about, isn't it? Isn't it?
That's what we all have been taught.
And God help the man who doesn't submit.
And God help the man who gets caught.

Traffic Tune

Buses and trucks, the sorry fucks,
Believe they own the street.
With shouts and sneers and fingers and leers,
They scorn who moves on feet.

They run red lights because they know
Wherever they may have to go
Is so much more important than
The life of the pedestrian
(And every walking animal should
Be run down, and run down good).

Trucks and buses make such fusses
When walkers spoil their race!
They ought to be hanged, or at least defanged,
And banned most every place.

Ballade on the Triumph of Bureaucracy

To every company or state,
 To every Chairman or Emir,
There is a vast conglomerate
 Of little people who adhere.
 Each bounces 'round from tier to tier
Like any practiced acrobat
 In what he calls his "life's career,"
So proud to be a bureaucrat.

He works hard to ingratiate
 Himself; he preens like Chanticleer
Whenever he's found adequate
 To be a tooth on a bigger gear
 Where he can fussily domineer
The lowly proletariat
 Who dare encroach upon his sphere,
So proud to be a bureaucrat.

Where are the dreams that fascinate?
 Where the anthems to glad the ear?
Where the virtues inviolate?
 Where the champions to revere?
 Banished by his lazy fear
Of thoughtful obligation that
 Would crush his supercilious sneer,
So proud to be a bureaucrat.

Envoy

Where are the hopes of yesteryear?
Tossed in the toilet where he shat,
The petty bourgeois brigadier,
So proud to be a bureaucrat.

On the Italian Plaza in Central Park

The plaza in the Park in Baroque style—
 Slow-rising steps; ornate, carved balustrade;
 The formal grotto of the brick arcade;
Carved birds and beasts and laced vine, mile on mile;
The view of lake and willows to beguile;
 The great round fountain with its angel maid,
 Her wings stretched for the pigeons' promenade;
The whole designed by some Italophile;
Now littered with the homeless, its stone birds
 Beheaded by trite wickedness, musty
 With piss—the purity of its design
Establishes as certainly as words
 That one fine thing built of humanity,
 Despite humanity, can still be fine.

Triolet on Age

Youth dribbles through our fingers like spilled wine
 And stains us with its brilliance, soon turned dull.
We are distracted by life while our fine
Youth dribbles through our fingers like spilled wine,
Then gape to see our mortal but divine
 And perfect bodies shriveled to a hull.
Youth dribbles through our fingers like spilled wine
 And stains us with its brilliance, soon turned dull.

The people change ...

The people change to insects willingly,
Despising stubborn Reason as a glim
That stupefies and burns the captive bee,
Disgracing Will, replacing it with Whim,
And call it individuality
To thoughtlessly approve the buzzing hive,
Its stultifying swarm a proof they're free,
Its busyness a proof that they're alive.
But freedom to these drones is simply this:
To want whatever they may want, or think
They want, or what they're told they want; and they
Mistake unthinking appetite for bliss,
These glad, inhuman mayfly-men who shrink
The whole long span of life into a day.

Those who were charged to serve ...

Those who were charged to serve have seized command.
Those who were meant to rule have sunk, resigned,
Glad to abandon, eager to be blind,
Lustful to make their world a lotus-land
Of empty entertainment, where no hand
Will be stretched out to beg, accuse, or grind,
Where no dismaying thought will rise to bind
The mind to action that would make them stand.
They do and breathe and race and breed and rave
Of sovereign rights they never dared debate,
Or judge, or choose, or change, or even learn,
But brag of freedom while becoming slave,
Gloat lovingly on victories won with hate,
And make dumb comfort their only concern.

On Reading Spenser's and Shakespeare's Sonnets in One Brief Afternoon

Dear Spenser, with his pretty metaphors
Of ships that sail astray when a star's light
Is hidden by the storm, his Bellamoures,
Those antient words he so loves to recite—
So pleasant, and so amiable, so polite!
We do not take too seriously his whim
To weep the sorrows of his dying spright:
His love-talk woos the shy bird from the limb.
And if his mistress turns away from him,
Or looks too long into her glass with pleasure,
He gently lectures her on old Time's grim
Advance, so that she timely mend her measure.
A thoughtful, cheerful poet whose bright cheer
Slips sermons in among the pleasures of the ear.

And Shakespeare moans the ravages of Time.
Whatever beauty or what strength he praises,
He peers beyond the glory of its prime
To beauty's fading, strength's decay, and raises
The spectre of inevitable age:
The shadows underneath his knowing eyes,
The minutes hastening ... bitter verbiage
Of youth's spent ashes where pale fire lies.
He chafes at love's smooth stroke, resents his fair,
Declares her lips are not so red as coral,
Her breasts are rather less than white, her hair
Is wire, her cheeks are somewhat less than floral—

Drags love itself to earth and nails it down,
Makes it no more than lust, himself a clown.

These two men who in verse have worried so love
Have given us the words by which we know love.

Where now are Amaryllis ...

Where now are Amaryllis, Rosalinde,
Stella, and Phyllida, Chloë, Lucrece,
Their lovers Lysidas, Damon, Daphnis,
The pretty men and maids who lightly pinned
Their mirths and plaints, metrically disciplined,
Upon their poets' eloquent caprice
To grant from this prose world a brief release?
Why are their ranks of followers so thinned?
Their slight yet solemn-toned extravagance
Transformed to glorious song the silliest flirt.
Their florid speech taught how love might be spoken
And hinted how even we, through bright romance,
Might learn to find a beauty in the hurt
Of owning a heart able to be broken.

Bald, wizened Hylas ...

Bald, wizened Hylas, trembling, raised his lyre
 To seek one last time the old song in its scale,
 Now, when his too long life's breath had grown stale,
His too long laboring heart begun to tire.
He tuned the brittle strings, lower and higher;
 And then, belying fingers cramped and frail,
 And eyes with certainty of rest grown pale,
He struck bright chords and sang with startling fire.

“Young I was, and impatiently I'd cry
 I'd die if Daphne would not be my mate.
 In prime I was, and made Death my ally
When Sylvia answered all my love with hate.
 Now I am old, and know that I must die.
 No cries. No vows for others' ears. I wait.”

The sonnet speaks of Love ...

The sonnet speaks of Love, no matter how
 Removed from romance, how inspired with lust
 Of intellect, rage, dignity, disgust:
Sharp modes that etch themselves upon the brow.
Whatever brutal words the lines allow,
 However sharp be introspection's thrust
 Or how thick righteous indignation's crust,
The sonnet speaks of Love, and keeps its vow.
For Love it is, though not the sighing kind,
 That will not lose its music in the storm
 Of what is fit or unfit, right or wrong,
But shows itself alike in soul and mind,
 And places words within the sonnet's form
 To prove our prosy thoughts worth poetry's song.

In sweet rest ...

In sweet rest after sweeter exercise
We'll mix our words as we have mixed our passions.
We'll send sleep off unsatisfied, too wise
To waste our loving in such separate fashions;
The marvel of remarking in embraces
And pretty, petty words, or speechless touch,
The mysteries of one another's faces
Will fill our time too full to lose so much.
But in that hour or more we will design
Eternity, to fix what we enjoy;
We'll paint and polish it and make it shine,
And treasure it like our most favorite toy,
Then lose it in new search for where and how:
Eternity is needless; we have now.

With you not here ...

With you not here I'll spill my love in words.
I'll bury you in adjectives and nouns.
I'll crush you underneath stampeding herds
Of syllables. I'll tempt you back with crowns
Of meteoric metaphor, and bring
You gifts of bombast and hyperbole.
With participial clauses, blossoming
Like poppy fields, I'll drug you back to me.
Then, when you're here with me, I'll take all talk
And lose it in the plainer language of
A look, a touch, an endless kiss, a walk
Of lips on skin: the rhetoric of love.
 We'll laugh to find my grand words, so profound,
 Struck dumb by speech that never makes a sound.

I fearfully recall ...

I fearfully recall my innocence,
 Long since set down, as one sets down the sweet,
 Old toys of childhood, sadly obsolete,
Unfit to face the grown world's violence,
False friendliness, and bland grandiloquence,
 Where sympathy too often masks deceit,
 And humans scorn humanity to bleat
As willing sheep, forsaking human sense.
But I know I have only set aside
 That innocence. I have not crushed it quite,
 But locked it up in cynicism's cage:
When I see foolishness self-satisfied,
 The evil hailed, the wrong proclaimed the right,
 My innocence reveals itself in rage.

I'm drunk

I'm drunk. This sonnet probably won't scan
Because I'm drunk, or maybe scan too well—
Devolve from poetry to doggerel,
Mere verse, because I'm just a drunken man.
I willingly denied the artisan
Within, used liquor as a calomel.
Sometimes a conscious mind is only hell,
And wine provides a necessary ban.
The Greeks thought Poetry a potent god
And thought the place to find her was in wine.
Perhaps the only god in wine's the nod
Of thick, thoughtless oblivion, and the mine
Of trackless sleep it offers, and the plod
From desperate night to next day's desperate shine.

You're gone ...

You're gone. But, lover, even with you gone
 I have you here, in my obedient
 And ready recollection of the scent
You have before you put your perfume on,
The shallow groove that acts as liaison
 Between your brows when you frown, the intent
 Way you cry when you yield to sentiment—
All that makes you my wild phenomenon.

I lie. These recollections only tease.
 I want to smell you, see you, taste and feel
 Your taste and touch again. I want to know
The scrape of your nails on me when you seize
 And pull me to you. Only these can heal
 The impatient wounds I suffer when you go.

The Snow Queen begs a kiss

The Queen, with eyes of frost and nails of stone,
Stepped from her wind-drawn carriage close to him.

“Kay, be my boy. I’ll take you where my ice
Makes mirrors of the mountains, where the clouds
Act pageants in the skies. I’ll build a palace
Of crystal, all its walls will be windows
So you can watch the sea when I send storms.
I’ll make the dolphins dive to sunken ships
To bring up silver out of dead men’s pockets.
I’ll fill your hands with diamonds, my one jewel.
I’ll show you all my secret stores of gold
And other things more precious. I will open
The stones to give you what the earth would hide.
But let me kiss you, Kay, and this is yours!

“Kay, be my boy. I’ll set you on my throne
And all the world will know you rule with me.
You’ll have the Winter Women to dance for you
And teach you all our country’s favorite songs.
They’ll weave you robes of glittering midnight fog,
Dyed in the colors of the wild aurora,
And sew you cloaks and slippers from the skins
Of seal and fox and caribou and bear.
You will command my armies as you like:
Send them to conquer far-off tropic lands
And watch the forests frosted by their swords,
Or order them to battle one another
And shatter themselves for your entertainment.
Across the world, in every human place,
Whoever has let cold into his heart

Or wished to chill another's, you'll command.
Kay, kiss me, and this kingdom will be yours!

"Kay, be my boy! Too soon in this warm place
You'll lose your pretty looks. Your dimples will
Dissolve in jowls, your white hands will turn rough
And rasp on any soft thing you would touch,
Your back will crook, your legs will knot and weaken,
Your lips will pale, and your eyes, those bright eyes
That glow like glaciers in the North's long night,
Will hide themselves behind their wrinkled lids,
Ashamed to have grown so dim and so useless.
But come with me and I will freeze your beauty
To keep it safe. You'll be forever young,
Like me, and strong, and beautiful, and mine.
But kiss me, Kay, and I will give you this!

"Kay, kiss me, be my boy! I need a boy.
I need a boy near me to learn what life is.
I know that life can live within my cold,
I've seen the bloom of lichen at the poles.
I've seen the sporting in the frozen sea.
I've seen the ice itself grow roots and sprigs
And reach like any live thing for the sun!
Kay! You're alive! And you can teach me life!
Your life can find the spark hidden in me,
As my cold found the glint of ice in you!
Kay, be my boy, come, Kay, give me your kiss!"

And young Kay, dazzled by the mirrored flakes
Of ice that sparked before her death-pale face,
And dazzled by her breathless, desperate words,
Leaned to her, sighed his last warm breath, and kissed.

Gerda's Song
from *The Snow Queen*

The rose will bloom and turn to brown.
The wind will wear the mountain down.
My love has gone,
And I will follow on.

The shining sun falls to the night.
The summer falls to winter's white.
My love has gone,
And I will follow on.

The storm will break the ancient tree.
The sand will sweep into the sea.
My love has gone,
And I will follow on.

Metaphor

She is a rose. No, no—she is the thorn.
No, better still: the leaf that folds the bud.
And yet she is the seed that falls unborn.
And, too, the planting. And the nurturing mud.
What do I mean? What metaphor will state
The what of what she is, the whole of her?
She is the garden, but she is the gate,
The pattern of the walks, the gardener,
The earth he digs, the hoe, the rain and sun
And sky and universe; all that may be;
Time past, Time now, the Future yet undone;
Thought, Thoughtlessness, Existence, Nullity—
I lose her in the lines I would compose.
She is no metaphor. She is no rose.

Translations of two Homeric Hymns

HOMERIC HYMN XIV TO THE MOTHER OF THE GODS

Sing to me, clear-voiced Muse, sing, daughter of
mighty Zeus, sing,
Sing of the Mother of all humanity and of all gods.
She takes joy in banging of drums and shaking of rattles,
Howling of horns and of wild wolves and of bright-eyed lions,
Making the hills and wooded valleys ring with their echoes.
Hail to you, Mother, hail to all goddesses, hail with loud song!

HOMERIC HYMN XXX
TO EARTH MOTHER OF ALL

I will sing Earth, the Mother of all, the firm foundation,
First-born, you who nourish all living creatures upon you,
All things that walk on the hallowed land, all that move
 through the oceans,
All things that fly in the air, all things, all are fed out
 of your bliss.
By you the peoples are blessed in their children and
 blessed in their harvests,
Queen, and you have it in your hands to give life or
 take life again from
Mortal humanity; happy the one whom, delighting
 in your heart,
You may honor! That one will have everything in abundance.
Fruitful land will be heavy with growing corn and the pastures
Crowded with herds of cattle, the house will be filled up
 with good things;
These lucky ones in the well-ordered city of beautiful women
Rule, and much happiness and great riches will attend them;
Sons will exult in merriment, proud with youthful rejoicing,
Daughters will gather in blooming choruses, hearts full of
 good cheer—
They will sport and frisk along the cushions of soft grass—
So you will honor them, holy goddess, bountiful spirit.
Hail, O Mother of gods, hail, spouse of the starry heaven,
Gladly give to me for my singing delightful life.
Now I will remember you and another song, too.

Talking

Dumb sumbitch, talking to his lunch,
“Stay on the fo’k, stay on the fo’k,
Don’ you fall off.” Old motherfucker,
Three teeth left in his crazyfuck head.

Old lady walking slow as death,
Walking with a cane, dressed up for something,
Fancy-ass earrings and stupid-ass hat
Up on her old-time Barbie doll ’do,
Talking to her feet to keep them going,
“Now you know there is just no help for it,
There’s nothing else she could have done.
She’s a good girl, a really good girl.”

Punkheads talking mile a minute,
Pretty faggot girl and butch-dyke boy
Wrapped up in each other like shit and spit.
“Yeah I know” “You know?” “But you gotta”
“No she shoulda” “You wanna” “Come on”
Pansy-white pierced-up painted punks.

Outta-town asshole moving uptown fast,
Stops, turns downtown, turns back uptown,
“Now I know it’s right around here somewhere”
Talking to hisself like he meant it all,
Nodding and talking like he knows what he’s doing.

Spit and turn and catch me in a window—
Whoa, my lips moving miles a minute.

River Phoenix

River Phoenix is dead!
The river is damned.
He clogged up his nose too often with
the white dust mortar,
O evil-deluded child.
His chest had to open the floodgates
into his too-full heart
So that he burst, victim of fun,
Posterboy for the Czars of Democracy.
“See what can happen?” they say,
Righteous in their own delusions.

Turn ye back children live not as he
Live the safe straight line of life to old age
When we’ll buy you your drugs care of Medicare

But the River is dead,
The stupid youth is dead,
The artist who gave off art (he did)
like dogs shake off water
In a fine spray
Is dead. O boy, why did you die so stupidly?
Sometimes the boring people are right a bit.
And those strange eyes and twitching motions are dead,
River Phoenix is dead,
Burned up, bricked up, unrisen,
River Phoenix is dead.

Being

Being gets me down
Existence wears
Life's a car with ungreased wheels
shrieking along

Oh I remember silence
Moments

Being asks too much
Even in the womb
my mother's heartbeat
kept me awake

Mountain

In the distance
a mountain
demanding ambition
of the plains

The Poison Man

1.

The Poison Man pokes me with a blunt, knowing finger.
“I killed a hundred men better than you.”
He keeps me tied up when we’re not playing cards,
Put down a queen to trick the other.

Sometimes he sits with his boot on my chest
And leans back casual with his stinking cigarette
Stuck on his lip like a sore. I hate that.
He grins because he likes it when he’s in control.
And he pokes me.
“I killed a hundred men better than you.”
Finger with the nail missing probes where I hurt
Like a knowing doctor, like a thoughtful lover.

Deal and fan the cards, flip down a queen
Without even looking, like I won’t care.
He learned all the tricks too long ago
And taught them to me, but with little things missing.

2.

He likes to sing when he kills, and he’s got
A good voice, smooth, with a fine sense of key,
So whoever he’s hurting almost wishes he were free
To applaud and show his appreciation.
He got his name when he was twelve,
From a woman who called herself Amaretto.
“I’m sweet as the drink,” she lied meeting people.

She caught him toying with a dog that heaved up
Green foam through its black gums from something he'd fed it.
"You waste your time on back-alley hounds,
You just be pitiful, Poison Man," she said.
He never forgot it.

He pokes the bruise again where he pokes me
So often the purple ache can't heal.
"What are you waiting for?" I ask him.
"I'm not worth anything."
He grins. He's always grinning, satisfied.
"Oh, you're too much fun to go quick on."
I wish I knew how to make him lose interest,
But if I howl or if I ignore him,
He grins and pokes and teases and grins.

"I don't know why you think I'm fun."
"I like watching the little people
Running inside you, peeking out the corners."
He talks like that to make me itch
When he's got my hands caught behind my back
So I can't scratch.

3.

Him with his pasty skin covered with bumps
Like stubble, like he shaves himself all over,
Like your hands would slide off him if you tried to catch hold.
But he's got a grip to make a man pale.

4.

The Poison Man's daddy was a Panhandle drifter
Come home from the Great War just long enough
To get his woman pregnant and sell her grandma's earrings
To buy himself a ticket the hell out of Borger.

In Milwaukee he took up with a colored prostitute
And sold enough of her and skinny mean cocaine
To build her a black opera house with a gambling parlor.
The Poison Man was near ten years old when it happened—
His mama moved to Houston to work for Henry Ford,
So she shipped him north to save her money,
“Because the boy needs a father.” The Poison Man
Spent six cold months with the colored opera singers,
Until the proper white boys of Milwaukee
Burned the abomination down.

He still likes to roam through the charred wreck of it.
He made me climb up the backstage stair once,
Rattle rattle on rusted spiral metal
Leaning at angles Euclid never dreamed
Over the hole where the curtain used to hang
Down to where the five-piece colored orchestra
Sat in the dark making music and sweating.

“I was a little thing then,” says the Poison Man,
“Creeping around looking for trouble.
Here was the peephole me and the man
With the violin looked in every night.
‘Boy,’ he said to me, ‘Mind your education.’
And the ladies, they knew it, and they didn’t mind it.
I remember they yelled at us, ‘It’s your nickel!’
Every night he took me here for a good look.
Hell, nothing I didn’t see before.”

5.

When the Poison Man has me pinned on the ground,
His cold flesh pressed tight down on me
And his breath warm with the stink of rotten teeth
(But those teeth are white on the outside, good for a smile),
He likes to call me sweet names, and giggles

When he does it, so I can't forget
The joke and think maybe he's starting to soften,
Starting to care just a little for me
So when he finally kills me it won't be so easy.

He poisoned twenty children at a nursery in Poughkeepsie,
Put a heaping handful of cyclamen in their oatmeal
One frigid winter morning.

"Give 'em cinnamon too, for a treat," he says,
Like he's proud of it, like he's Santa Claus.
"There couldn't have been money in it," I say to him.
He shrugs atop me, takes his gray eyes off me.
"Not much money," he admitted. "I'm impulsive.
Always been my weakness." Coy as a schoolgirl.
But he puts his face back down to mine,
Bares his teeth to give a nip
That draws blood.

He watches me close. If I get sad
He talks to me endlessly of women he knew
Who tried their best to ruin him. If
I manage to laugh at something I remember
He tightens the knots about my legs until
The blood slows and my skin swells
Around the ropes in a thin white grip.
If I show my anger he rushes out to kill
And tells me all about the horror I've made
Daring to be angry.

6.

Him with his square jaw muscled for tearing meat,
Him with his gray eyes that don't shine to the light
So in the dark you can't see him, no, not the hint of him.

7.

Daddy disappeared, and the pretty colored lady
 With the diamonds on her fingers and the white dust on her lip
 Sold the boy to a brewer for thirty cents a week.
 The boy couldn't stomach the bitter smell of hops in him,
 And ran off to the railroad yards to find someplace else.
 He wandered the country, biding his time,
 Killing little things for the pleasure of it,
 Till he'd grown bigger than this lying daddy.
 In Frisco he learned to throw a solid left hook,
 But it was Milwaukee'd taught him how to slip a shiv
 Quiet and certain between a man's ribs.
 He did it once or twice in the dock streets of Frisco
 And smiled when he did it as neat as a seamstress
 So the man on the other end barely knew he'd died.
 Then after he'd spent what the corpse had in its pockets
 He'd watch the rich men with their girlies doing Chinatown.
 Gives a man ideas.

But the ones he tells me about, there's no money in them.
 He tells me about the ones for fun,
 The young ones, the trusting ones, the ones who die puzzled.
 He watches me close to see when I tremble.
 That's when he gets into the details.
 That's when he strokes me with his cold, damp hand,
 Strokes me so I can feel the sharp edges
 Of his carefully honed nails.

"There was a boy in Tallahassee,"
 He says, "hadn't the sense God gave a goat.
 He followed me around like a lonesome pup,
 And if I hit him he followed me more."
 "I don't believe you," I dare to say.
 He doesn't care. "True all the same.
 When I got tired of that boy's company
 I took him under the highway bridge

And told him he could walk away from me
Or I'd have to kill him. He looked at me—
Had the longest eyelashes you ever saw—
And he said, 'I'm staying.' I put my hands
On his throat, and he kissed them. He liked my hands.
I did him slow so he went gradual,
And he watched me quiet the whole time."
He strokes the inside of my arm
To raise a vein. Then with a quick pinch
He opens it in a clean, thin line
And runs his finger idly through the swelling red.

8.

The Poison Man put his hands on me long ago.
At first I didn't know to run.
I wondered what sort of man he was,
I wondered why I stayed and listened
To his whispering, wheedling horror stories.
Then it was too late. He had me.
Once I broke free. I got away
And ran in the sun for a number of days,
Enjoyed the heat of it and the people
Around me. I stayed in crowded places.

He was stalking me. I finally felt his shadow
And hid in the most light-filled places I knew,
Made noise to cover his nearing footsteps.
He took me. Not right off. He played with me first.
When I was trapped again, bound and bundled,
He told me, "You didn't break that rope.
I cut it for you."
Watching me close to see how I'd falter.

I think I didn't give him the satisfaction.

I wake up hearing people singing
 And the rattle of dice over grunts of men.
 In the shadows there are two black women
 Dressed like nuns, watching me.
 People move in the the dark, watching me.
 I hear applause.

The Poison Man keeps me bound to a chair
 With a teddy-bear bib tied around my throat,
 Not so tightly as the cords around my wrists.
 He holds my nose shut to force my mouth open
 And spoons in syrupy-sweet poison,
 "Here comes the airplane into the hangar."
 Then he rubs my throat to make me swallow.
 It's something slow that causes cramps.
 I can feel it working there inside me
 With thousands of little pin jabs making
 Pretty designs in my stomach's lining.

"Look, just kill me," I moan like an actor.
 He's not fooled. "No way, baby.
 It's no fun if you go too quick."
 "It's not a game!" not acting now.
 "It is, boy," he says. "And the way I win
 Is if I don't even have to kill you."
 I don't want to ask What do you mean?
 I don't have to. "The way I win, boy,
 Is when I get you to kill yourself."

He doesn't smile then. This isn't the game.
 He didn't say "if."

I try to put a cocky face on.
 "And what's the way I win?" I ask.
 "You don't." he says. He still doesn't smile.

10.

Him with his quick grip pulling me up the steps,
My feet rattle rattle on the iron spiral
Past the open doors and locked doors and rigging and spotlights,
Into the swaying top of the house,
Pointing out the dark things moving in the shadows
Below us that stare at us, at me on the stairs—
Making me listen to the clatter of the crap game,
The insults, invocations, and quick reach for weapons—
Making me listen to the lousy music
And the lousy singing.
Making me listen. “But they burned it down!”
Making me look. “You told me
They burned it down!”

“Why, sure they did,”

The Poison Man whispers. “Burned it right down.
But it’s still here, isn’t it? Isn’t it, sweet boy?
And those little people living in it, they’re still singing,
Oh, pretty music. Pretty, pretty music.”
And he laughs, holding me over the dark,
Over the echoing off-key noises
That should have been burned to ashes years ago.

11.

“You’re nothing but lies,” I say through a mouthful
Of syrup-sweet poison corroding my tongue.
The Poison Man smiles and says, “Wrong again,”
And sings something soft and loving in Italian.

Poem

I want to write a poem long enough
to stretch around your slim thighs twice
Like the classically queer old Greeks
To see my words speckled on your so pale
almost hairless flesh
A girdle twice wrapped knotted at your
classical genitalia
Petite and neatly so discreetly tucked up
until the exercise begins
A rope of my words sideways figure eight
symbol of infinity
Curling about your so finite self
just the right size
I want you to be my poem long enough

Invocation

Nonnos my poet,
Wild bard who spurns
Calm moderation,
Weave me rich tapestries of verse
Thick-fleeced to cut
Harsh winds of the proper,
The measured, the moderate,

Leave the threads dangling
White, purple, red, black,
Like the woolen strips
Athletes and initiates
Wear to honor victory.
Bind me to your words,
To the great web you reveal.

The Mad God

I.

The mad god is come! Io Dionusos!
The women rage through the wild hills
In an ecstasy of horrid gladness.
The men are left to love one another,
Give spirits form in furious coupling.
*The god born of lightning and mortal woman
Whom Hera hunted across the earth
Who fled the scourges of Lycurgus
Into the deeps of dim ocean
And the arms of protecting Thetis*
Wine flows as blood across the thirsty land.
The band
Of bakkhantes bang loudly on drums and one another,
Shriek flutes, break the strings of Apollo's lyre—
The fire
Of wine purges them of civilization
And nature thrusts up its peaks through them,
Rives them with an immortal's "Yes!"
The name of the mortal god, child of the lightning,
Thunders above the trembling towns
Buffets the stones of the law-giver's palace.
*The mortal god blasted with flame and flash
Rescued from burnt and riven womb
And placed in the wound of the thigh of the god
Fed with his blood till come to term
Torn into pieces by ravening hands
Patched back together, descended to Hades*

*Raised again to earth and thence to the heavens
But returned to earth to bring to mortals
The madness that blesses and destroys*

Men tear their beards with the women away
And mingle blood in hungry kisses—
This is how the god takes them.
The maenads mad in the hills beat the thickets,
Drive out the fawns to give them suck
At their soft breasts in loving motherhood,
Then rend the beasts with cracking nails
And devour the flesh in raw chunks
With the blood running down their chins.
They taste from the dead and one another's mouths
To feel the glory that feeds and destroys.

The boys

Of the towns lie under the men
While mothers and sisters and aunts dance
Away in the stony hidden places,
Grasp the men tight to their hairless bodies.

*Io Dionusos! The mad god is come!
The harrower of Hades who rescued Semele
His mother from the shades of black Elysion
Conqueror of the Ind whom the ivy hid
When his mother perished before Zeus's flame
Of whom the vine is the earth's offering
With the wine that gladdens and numbs and brings down*

A woman falls beneath a hemlock
In trembling trance with quivering limbs,
Screeches out prophecies to the dead staring moon,
A croon

Of small home happenings and weighty disasters.
The women leap about her like the deer they've slain.
Another band races upon a herd
And seizes the largest bull in their sharp hands,
Rips muscle from bone, hoof from horn,
Bellowing bull wild-white-eyed beneath them,

Helpless in hands that pull and rend,
Dead and stripped to ragged meat
And empty black skull.

The women dance on
Through the mountains' night-pale forests
With drum and tambourine and stabbing flute.

Io Dionusos! The mad god is come!
There in the trampling of maddened crowds
There where the ground is muddied red
There where the naked feet drum the dust
There where the treble cries pierce the shades

The brute

Has left the men, they lie on the young ones
In the streets of the towns, beard to bare chin,
Wasted by madness that sent forth the women.
The nymph sends echoes of the women's wailing
Through the male dreams, and all shiver, fearful
In sleep, in darkness, in dread unconscious.

The mad god is come! Io Dionusos!

II.

Beneath the surface Dionusos walks
Along the downward track to Hades' depths
In darkness where the eye itself is dead
And only stumbling feet and outstretched hands
Can feel the way. The mad god seeks his mother,
His mother Semele, the mortal woman
Who brought to Earth a god, mated a god,
And bore a god. He goes to find her shade,
To steal her out of death's black, grasping hands
And raise her into light above the air,
Raise her to where her rightful place should be.

His women sit above upon the earth
And wail for him and for his blasted mother,

And wish him back with them in open air.
He cannot hear them. He walks here alone.
This one time in his life he goes alone.

The path descends. He hears the echoing
Of lives only passed by, of wasted time.
He hears the solemn, whispered weeping, lost
In time regretted, and he hears a howl
Of lamentation for what might have been.
The one he seeks could not mourn wasted time.
He hurries on—his mother won't be here.

And now he hears an idiot, barked laugh,
And further laughter in the distant dark,
The manic chuckling of what let life go
And never thought to worry at its passing;
What never knew true life, and knows not death,
And laughs for no more reason than to sound.
The one he seeks died knowing life too well.
He hurries on—his mother won't be here.

He crosses a vast plain, gray, featureless.
Here lone shades move but do not seem to move,
Move pointlessly, from there to there to there,
Not looking up, not looking down, not seeing,
Not noticing, not wondering, not caring:
The patient, empty, unsubstantial dead.
The god of life and death peers into each
Gray, vacant, mindless face that passes by
In search of one whom he has never seen,
And hurries on, glad not to find her there.

A tone arises worshipful of him,
A sound come from the very rocks around
So that a god may not pass by unhymned.
He follows it and enters in Elysion,
The last abode of those apart from life.
There, with sure steps, he draws near to a ghost
Less shadowed than the others of this place,
A ghost who sits in a remembered light

Of holiness that gifted bliss and doom.
He reaches out his pale and living hand
And touches her, the one whom he has sought,
The long-desired, too long unknown.
The ghost slowly, so slowly looks at him.
The wakened mother-eyes take light from him
And shed it back upon the glorious son.
The quickened shadow hand touches his hand.
With new weight in her form she stands to him.

But then the dark itself moans, rises up
To stop him, cries to hold its property.
And then the dead themselves, those formless shades,
Aroused by Hades's cry, rush from their hells
Upon live Dionusos that they might
Take hold of him and with this god escape.
The wildness that accompanies the god
Possesses all, even in this frozen place
Where want and hope and heart and need are numbed.
Bakkhos falls back and calls his bassarids,
But they are nowhere near and cannot come.
He cloaks his mother's ghost in warrior's arms,
Here where no warrior's spear or sword will aid.

Alas! that Hades is unmerciful,
Will not take gold to grant this life again,
Or Dionusos would stamp on the earth
And make it vomit up its unmined ore.

The millions and the millions of the dead
Heap on him like a mass of dried, black leaves.

Alas! that Hades cowers behind the throng
And will not guard his prize in honest fight,
Or Dionusos would prove here his strength,
Would swing his ivied staff until it whirled
And sent a clean wind through this stagnant air
To sweep the greedy, gabbling dead away.

The millions and the millions of the dead
Swarm round him like a fog of graveyard flies.

Then the mother lifts her hand and strokes
Her son and god's throat to call forth his song.
He seizes her hand, presses it in flesh,
And opens wide his mouth with melody,
The savage notes that madden human minds
And send them raving into dance and lust.
He sings in tones that dart and leap and swoop
And pounds the thursus on the hidden stones
To mark the shifting time and guide the dance.
The dead, the millions dead, hear and recall
The mortal minds and forms they knew before;
Their shadowed feet flit on the untouched dust,
Their hands rise up above their ghostly hair
To reach for heaven somewhere far above,
Their long-sealed mouths split open and spill out
In hoarse, dulled, raven tones the words of praise.
Io Dionusos! The mad god is come!
The mad god comes! Io Bakkhos! Io Zeus-born!
The dead dance and fall back before
The mortal god Dionusos and his mother.

Hades growls and fumes black clouds of rage
To fill his palace corridors and kill
The rising song, the gleeful, madding words,
To damp the stamping noise that stings his ears.
But Dionusos marches through the host
As when he rode his sunlit chariot
From India to Macedonia
In triumph as the conqueror of the Ind,
And through the leaping shadows leads his mother,
His mother Semele, the Thunderer's lover,
From this lost, emptied, failed, and fading place.
Across the dimming plain, up the blind path
He leads her with his worshipers about him
Away from death. He is its master now.

Then they are on the world again, in light,
They stand in light, his hand in her true hand,

The son beside his mother, heaven's lady,
The son beside the one who gave him life,
The son beside the one he now gives life,
Before his ever-father, her once-husband.
For seasons they so stand, as all the powers—
Those loving them, those seeing them with spite—
Approach with awe, and bow, and welcome them.

And when they've touched the deeps of their two griefs
And filled somewhat the void they each have known
With the clear sight each of the other's face;
And when they've come to know they need not fear
The loss they only now have understood;
Then, then the mad god smiles and solemnly
Lifts up his mother Semele to heaven
And seats her there beside her lover-god—
A constellation missed until her coming
To mark an emptiness not realized.
Then Dionusos twice-born, Zeus-born Bakkhos
Leaves father, mother, like a comet's tail,
A portent for the peoples of the earth.
He finds his women keening in the dust
And heals their lacerated breasts and faces,
Calls forth a vine and ripens it to wine
To clear their eyes and freshen their sore mouths.

He looks again up to the star he's made.
His women watch him as the daylight dims.
And then he raises up his ivied staff
And strikes it on the stones and rings the Earth
Like a great bell. His mad bakkhantes leap
About him like the ashes in a flame.
He leads them from the mountains to the plains,
He leads them from the deserts to the fields,
He leads them in the worship of himself,
A son of god and goddess now, a god.

III.

In the theatre before the mask of the god
The robed matrons and the full-bodied men
Are gathered at the sun's last dimming
To witness the marriage of Dionusos.
The mothers gossip and weave green garlands
Out of the long-stemmed marching ivy,
The bearded men speak in muttered low tones
Of the fields and the horses and the doings of leaders.
Their eyes are rough with the night's long watching,
Red like the eyes of woodland foxes
Caught in the flare of the watchfire's glitter.

Then the grandmothers, who have watched the sky
A-squat on the seats above the khoros,
Cry at the star's first kiss of the earth's rim,
Silence them all with the hymn of the sun.
The tones of the worship of golden Apollon
Rise high and birdish from their wattled throats.
The husbands and wives, the mothers and fathers
Turn to the west, to the crown of the Smintheon
Sinking below the swell of the ocean.
Some old man takes up the barbitos
And they sing to Apollon in doubled melody.

*Iéie Paián! How shall we sing you?
Savior who rescues from above!
Apollon who steams the rivers
Apollon who draws up the wheat
Apollon who measures the hours
Apollon who orders the cities
Apollon far-shooter, Delos swift-sighted
Phoibos plague-master, Loxios, Light!
How shall we sing you, father of music?
Marshal our mouths to do you honor
Lover of well-disposed melody
Apollon fire-crowned! Iéie Paián!*

And as he hides himself in the waters,
His light's muted glory striping the heavens,
The men and the women, the elders and crones
Join their musics in one great sound.

Then!

Then from the town behind them a crash
Of drums and systra and cymbals and clapping,
A shout, and the people turn from the west,
Turn to the town, which lies now in darkness,
Turn to worship the mad mortal god,
Born of the Earth who delights in noise.
The grandmothers lift their brown robes from the dust,
The matrons tie their skirts round their waists,
The men kick off their sandals and greaves.
Another shout, an ululation
Of childish voices in ecstasy
Shakes the hills, fills the sky
With wonder at breath and promise of laughter.

The men answer with roars like bulls,
The women bleat and beat their thighs,
The crones and elders cackle praise.
The amphitheatre glows in the sunfall,
The light fails. A flare of torches
Flashes and shows the grape-hedged roadway.

There in the red light stand the maidens,
Gathered in sorrow, heads hung down,
True tears falling to their white feet.
Dressed in black, they flail the earth
With their uncut, unbound hair.
They weep their abandonment by the hero
On the stone shores of southern Naxos.
Keening they make their slow way down the road,
Keening they enter the amphitheatre.
The women and men scatter before them,
The crones and the mothers raise voices of sorrow,
Remembering the loss they too once wept.

The men cover their shame-filled faces
And kneel to the maidens, receive the lashes
Of the girls' hair as they pass by.

The maidens circle the stone-paved khoros
And wail their fate with the high cries of birds,
Then run with their black robes slapping
Away from the people, toward the sea,
As if they would throw themselves into doom.
The mothers and the men shriek
And the maidens collapse upon the Earth,
Deathly rigid in deathly pose.

The men and the women begin to sing
The song of guidance to the dead
Like the sound of the waves of the sorrowing ocean.

*The Bride is abandoned, the Bride is lost
The Bride is betrayed, the Bride is dead!
Call down the clouds to cover the Earth
To hide the shame of the fickle land
Gather the cypress leaves for the weaving
Crown her and cry her and sing her deceiving.*

Then!

Then from the road, from the woods, from the hills,
The thunder of tumpana, clangor of kumbala,
Noise of the son of the god of the stormclouds.
The men and the women shout *Iakkhos!*
In sudden light the black woods burst open
To reveal the virgin boys dressed in purple,
Covered about with wreathes of ivy
The immortal and ever greening vine,
Bright in the crackling light of pine torches,
Flame of the living green tree of winter.
Flutes wreath vines of tune about them.
They point their toes and stretch their hairless legs
In the march of the god to the shore of the sea.

In the sown fields behind the hills
Dogs are howling and tame beasts are stamping

In their stalls, at their ropes, in the pens and the keeps.
The ocean heaves and strains toward air.
The clouds scud from the sky in dread
And night stands naked and blue with cold.
The people feel their breath come gasping—
They cannot fill their locked breasts.

*The mad god is come! Io Dionusos!
Iakkhos! The waker from the great sleep!
Cradle-god, lord of the songs of night!*

The grown ones tremble as the boys approach
Swinging aloft the leaf-wound thursi,
Filling the night with solemn din
To thrill the Earth and appall the skies.

*Lenagétas! Liberator!
Seed and seedling, blossom and fruit!*

The boys raise their knees high before them
And step like proud steeds into the theatre,
Home and hearth of the mad mortal god.
They raise the thrysi, rattle them wildly,
Drive them down, strike the stones,
Ring the Earth like a great bell.
They shout, and a cry of flutes sets the measure
For the dance they perform about the dead maidens.

*Iakkhos! Dionusos! Bakkhos stephanou!
Tree-god in bud and bloom and browning!*

The bearded men and the mothers stand
In silence in ranks about the khoros,

Child of the sacrificed! Io Bakkhos!
And do not move, do not dare look down,
But open their eyes wide and see all.

*Fig-phallus! Huge-growing dancing spring-god!
Come where the banished bride lies abandoned!
Come where the blood from her broken heart flowers!
Come where the boots of Hades have trampled
The blossom of woman's love into corpse-flesh!*

The virgin boys drop their white arms.
They fall and creep like wary hounds,
They creep on their fingers to where the maidens
Lie in heaps in their black death-shrouds
Like the breasts of the Earth herself.
The boys, the young and beardless gods,
Touch with wondering fear the dead,
And the Earth and Air and Ocean and Breath
Fall silent.

Then!

Iakkhos!

The boys leap
The men shout
Now the drums
Now the pounding
Beasts fall silent
Dread takes wild things
Now the stamping
Now the trampling
The mad god mourns
Pleads, demands

Io Dionusos!

Gaia denies
Hades dissembles
The mad god attacks
Stumbles, fails
Gaia refuses
Hades rejoices

Io Bakkhos!

The mad god calls
The dead answer
Battle is joined
Bearded men caper
Mothers gambol
Drums bang the old ones
Up to their feet
Gaia renounces
Hades falters
The mad god sings
The mad god laughs
The mad god laughs

The maidens in their black robes tremble,
Quake like the Earth with wonders within.
Their white hands dart into the moonlight,
Their white arms reach toward the living.
They moan and growl in a second birth,
Toss back their long unbound hair,
Show their pale faces proud to heaven,
Proud to the young gods who stand beside them.

The Bride lives! The Bride is restored!

The god of triumph! Death-deceiver!

The boys take hold and lift them from earth,
Raise them above their heads into cool air.
The wild drums stop.

The people step forward
In solemn pace to join the young ones,
Mother and father, grandmother, grandfather
Enter the circle, arms outstretched
To embrace with love and awe the mystery—
The mad god and his living bride.
The fire of madness, the cold of sea-wave,
The rush of stormwind, the certainty of stone.
The people unite, all touching all,

Young and old embracing all,
Each the other, each the other,
Mortal and nymph, god and woman,
Living and dead and living lovers
Met and mingled and married together
And whole.

These things never were, but always are.
—Sallustios, *Concerning the Gods* 4.9

To the Reader

My blood is no feast
More like an appetizer
I know you want something more substantial
Something chewable
Something that fights back

I'll smear it on the page
Heart pulped on pulped paper
A pasty stain of muscle tissue
Cartilage and mucous membrane
That won't let the page fold flat

Eat
That's what I'm here for

Paradoxical Sleep

The shriveled man who is not old
Shoots the promising plump high school athlete
—all possibility—
At the golf tournament
While the crowd watches with the same glazed stares
They will watch the video on the tv news
Tonight and tomorrow and again and again

“I always hated him”
The bullets pumped in with heartbeat rhythm
—boom—boom—boom—
Making the body jump despite its dead weight
Captured from six different angles
On the news
—boom—boom—boom—
From the right from the left from above
And the crowd hope to see themselves on tv

The shriveled man with the same glazed stare
But you didn’t even know him
You never met him”

All possibility dead weight

I will raise my fist ...

I will raise my fist to the heavens where I've been told
All that is true and good is, and say NO
The shortest and the strongest of all words
NO to your lists of dos and don'ts and don'ts
NO to your smug carolings in safe chords
NO to your fabled hand ready to smash me down
My one booming NO to your many nattering nos
My fist to your fist
My face dared to yours

I will dig my fingers in earth, rich or dead, loam or sand,
Where all that makes me living is plain to see
I will say YES—the hardest word to mean
YES to animal motion and simple survival
YES to the millions of things that don't yet know me
YES to the tang of grime beneath my nails
As many YESes as my mouth can make,
And nods when I grow hoarse
Myself daring to be

NO and YES my pillars
Supporting my determined edifice

Let rage be my ground for leaping
Banish oriental mystic calm
I will pummel my way
I will eat life in great bites
I will chew my way through it
Let me catch hold and throttle the flavor out of life

Into my open, insatiable, demanding mouth
And if I am pulverized
Let my dust penetrate all
Irritate housewives
Clog fine machinery
Make itself known

Music is made of tension
The taut string gives the purest tone
Loose flesh makes disgusting noises

And you up there, you NO-thing
Here is my stored up, hoarded, treasured spit
Hurtling at your eye with my unerring aim
As for the horrified droning mobs around me
Let them beware—
I have spit enough for all!

Politic

Not even trying, I won
The little race I'd run;
 But I ignored the prize.
"I did it for the fun,"
 I said, as to chastise—
 And other lies.

They bid me run again
To prove me best of men,
 But I turned from the test.
Refusing with disdain,
 I quietly suggest
 I must be best.

Virtually Dull

In a virtual land full of virtual sand
designed by some virtual thinkers,
A human boy balked when he virtually walked
in his virtual power-glove and blinkers.
For he knew that when he would walk here again he
would find the same sights unchanged,
With the virtual bees and the virtual trees
and the virtual toads all arranged
In the very same virtual spots where they were to all
walkers who walked here the last time.
Thus the virtual duty of virtual beauty
created a wearisome pastime.
For by typing in codes on a monitor's nodes
they create rather limited guises,
Necessarily bringing a dull, tinny pinging
to welcome or nasty surprises.
And no matter what sweat the creative types get
to construct every virtual city,
They must always fall short—for the truthful report
is a world's only made by committee.

Instructions

Bury me
beneath a tree
 and leave the tree to stand
so I can say
after that day
 one thing went as I planned.

Wake up human

pour out your giant cup of electric awareness
blue crackle in the bowl
ozone shower the sleep from your hair
rub your eyes with everready fists
and touch someone synthetic to see them spark

a soft finger stroke from ankles to the base of the neck
a lively way to come awake
and the taunting pull of linen sheets
the drag that catches briefly there
the final quick whisk and the lunge of yes I will

it's light out now no need to deal
with the forest dweller who makes up
the dark dreams you won't tell anyone to seem
interesting shake them off with the dead skin
shed in the tossing night

wish a good morning to the unmistreatable philodendron
if that's all you have
twist and bend to feel your spine
crack like a crab boiled in fresh water
there's lemon and hot butter waiting
wish the morning good

Ode to Unsafe Sex

Come, live with me and be my love
And we shall all the pleasures prove,
For I shall suck you morn and night
(And in the day, if you're polite).

I'll do the unsafe things you dream
And all the moves to make you scream
Until the neighbors must complain,
And then I'll do it all again.

After I've made you a wet wreck,
I'll lick you round from toes to neck
And kiss the secret interstices
The experts say give bad diseases.

After you, my love, have rested,
I'll profit from what I've invested:
For you will use your knowing hands
And other parts to rouse my glands.

With nips and pokes and gentle rubbings
And eager pounces and sound drubbings
You'll do to me as I've done unto—
My lover toy, my utmost fun, too.

Because, despite the un-PC-ity
Of our sex life, this is my deity:
To please and be pleased by my love;
Our trust we have no need to prove.

To the admirers and detractors of the biographers of poets

Will the ones who write the theses understand
these are my words, these are my blood-deep feelings,
but this page is not me?

This page, these characters, only express
tangentially my attempted reality.

Truth lies here, if I do it right. Truth lies
in Mr. Pepys's fat, endless books of doings.

"November 4, I rose, ate,
showered, shat."

"In the gray haze of this park
view is me."

Which is more important? Which more true?
It's all hopeful stabbings, sly dodges
around the sore parts, over the tender nodes,
tuning to what we'd like to be, soft or harsh
or sweet or smart or suicidal.

Utterances

are sketches
suggestive as

half-drawn maps

As useless.

Nine Words

“The wind moaned from the face of the moon ...”
—William S. Burroughs, Jr., *Kentucky Ham*

That's the coldest wind
With all the sting of a thousand-mile fall
And you only get it
By looking up
Look up Billy
The happy criminal junky shootemup boy
Dead before his time
And what the hell does that mean
Whose time is it anyway

The jolly traveling jittery everboy
Whose life revolved around a bright bullet hole
Like a red-and-white-striped tin top
That makes plinky toybox music as it spins
He saw the world from rim to well
And looked away too with a fine turn of his head
A needle and the works
Or a dropper and a razor
The finest visions demand a little bit of blood

Look up Billy
See the cornered stars
Trapped in the tall fence
Around the hospital
Tangier was never like this
Never like Tangier

A careful knot of nine words
A fine turn of phrase like that turn of your head
A description of the wind
And the memory of the palmettos at someone's death
You hit it Billy
Higher than the horse higher than the syrup
The happy traveling son of a genius hit it
And what's the difference between genius and genius
You have to look up

Move over Whitman

“I too walked the streets of Manhattan Island ...”

—Walt Whitman

Move over Whitman

Too many walk the streets of Manhattan Island now

It's sinking like a waterlogged nest

like a big soggy lump of pulp and poison waste

to clog up the two slimy rivers to the sea

Island? what island? too many bridges

to call these heaps of rubble islands

Just a lumpy delta with granite-and-steel grafts

sprouted like horny cancers

Oh how trendy what attitude

But the lights look so pretty coming in at the airports

(only at night of course)

and the noise and rush just so exhilarating

and the shortness of the dollar here that so clearly delineates

the difference between me and them or you and me or me

Why we wouldn't think of living anyplace else

So move over Whitman I've got places to go

You prophet poser we don't have time now for you

Move over

I feel romantic

I feel romantic. Let me rhapsodize
With fingers and with tongue on your sweet skin,
With nipping teeth upon your pout-lipped grin,
With fluttered breath upon your garlic sighs.
Don't back away. I want wild music playing
To score my lust, high violins and horns
That blast with thunder like a thousand morns
To make majestic my attention's straying.
Please, let me be romantic. Please, react
Appropriately when I touch your knees.
Just this once don't disrupt my fantasies
With asking or refusing, or the fact
Of your own being with your own desires.
I feel romantic, damn it. Quench my fires.

Vow

You can't depend on the heart,
But I want to always love you.
So I do. And sometime later,
If I watch some lovely young thing
More closely than you like,
Just tell yourself I'm thinking
Of the young thing you once were.
Because I'm just as old as you
And there isn't too much chance
Any pretty young thing will tumble
Into my wrinkly lecher hands.
So no matter what may happen,
I intend to love you always
Just as long as I can.

In Spring

My pants are too tight!
I feel like the winter won,
That five pounds of extra insulation
We midwesterners tend to put on
Has triumphed over my intentions.
I'm not the sleek hithering thing
I saw myself as with my pillowy love handles
Squeezed out over the rim of my
Too-tight pants.

Resignation

Then again, there's always life,
Where nothing is unknown,
And all the usual boring strife
Is only drone
To glad hysteria's piping tune
And ennui's dull thrum:
The thing we fritter away too soon,
Secure and numb.

Labyrinth

We danced in the open fields, intricate steps—

We turned our steps into walls.

We danced celebrations to the power of the bull

Openly beneath the sun's full light—

We roofed over our dance.

We sang loud enough to drown the wind

Songs of praise and joy and recognition—

We made our songs shadows behind a locked door.

The seduction of secrets stole our thoughts—

We became ashamed of openness.

Our joy in the strength and fertility of the bull,

Huge and proud and so much simply itself—

We decided it a monster.

Our understanding of the solidity of the beast,

The divinity of blood and flesh and breath—

We hid it within the shadowed place.

A single thread, a sharp blade, a determined mind—

We murdered the monster.

A search in the dark, a thrust at shadows—

We murdered our monster.

We murdered our hidden godthing, left it to rot—

The labyrinth remains.

Stone-walled, stone-roofed,

Duplicitous, silent,

With its beautiful corpse—

An impossible dance.

What I would be

My love, I'd be a tree to shade you from the sun.
My love, I'd be a path to show you where to run.
My love, I'd be a brook to give you water clean.
My love, I'd be a court to have you queen.

My love, I'd be the leaf that falls to touch your cheek.
My love, I'd be the breeze that dies to hear you speak.
My love, I'd be the bloom that's cut to know your touch.
My love, I'd be much less to be so much.

My love, I'd be a steed to ride you safe from harm.
My love, I'd be a lark to rest upon your arm.
My love, I'd be a beast to give you sport or play.
My love, I'd be a man if you would have me stay.

Vocalise

I left the landlocked place where I was born and raised
 some years ago
And traveled in three days to this fist of land
 raised against the ocean.
Because I thought here I could sing more clearly, or at least
 be heard by many more people.
Now I hum to myself, in a very low voice,
 because of the cramped air,
And fewer people hear me now than when
 I was in the flat inland country,
Because O my quiet, and O their noise,
 and everyone talking but so few listening.
This is a place where even the ocean surges unheard,
And my voice has grown small and apologetic
 and sad and angry.

Suicide as a Way of Life

I am groping toward something I wouldn't dare try to find
unless I saw no other way.
I am killing myself systematically, and I am so frightened
I often catch myself shivering.
It appalls me to recognize the habits I've lived under
for so many years and tell them No.
Have I been this in the full sight of the world all this time
and no one to stop me?
Has anyone noticed?

And if it weren't for the dim hope, but the true hope,
that there is something beyond my struggles,
A place and life of less trembling, less fearing,
and some joy in whatever I may do,
I wouldn't bother. I'd sit and fret and send my mind
through disgusts and pointless dreads—
The simple continuance of all the false and ugly I've known
and kept so carefully.

But there's no question of my not moving on this strange
and new and unmapped way:
The irrational, methodical murder of all the false faces
I have called myself.
The only other choice would mean to murder what stands
behind the row of masks.
And then I couldn't watch them as they tumble
like a row of dominoes at my first push.

On Gorky's *Mother*

This book is rough-hewn as fresh-felled timber
After how many years?
Filled with such crudities as the literati scorn
But underneath the splinters, the knots,
Truth like the grain of the wood.

On the Nature of Consciousness in Sleep

Image moves with image in nongrammatical syntax
Scene precedes scene appropriately without the theories
beloved of artistes
Manticore is mother is theriomorph is
stereoptican is pterodactyl swooping
on boy in Keds sneakers
And see the flower open in Disney slo-mo
With a frame around it and the remembered blue glow

The mind's belly swells pregnant with
unrecognized, uncategorized meaning
So profound
I want to share it with someone
Don't you see the drama?

All the mystery and myth
Crumble like week-old loaves
In words' fists

To Allen Ginsberg

You'll curse me or laugh, say I'm no poet,
But O Allen Ginsberg forget your cock.
It was a nice cock but like every old lady's story
We've heard it all before and it's just gone on too long.
Find the pulse of blood behind the appendage,
Howl again like you've found someone interesting.
We need howls now more than masturbation.

No white bird

Hope is no white bird it's
a piece of paper with
the one phone number on
it blowing out of your
hand in a hard fast wind

Vengeance

To mortal mind Revenge may seem sweet Justice;
A candy for the bitterest tooth to savor;
A bauble for the mind to fondle, cast,
A sparkling toy; a heavy jewel; a meat
Of richest flavor, needing no French sauce.
But they who seek the plate with slobbering lips,
Anticipating rare and glorious good,
Find one fell truth when burnt upon its crust:
 The lust for Justice is like molten gold,
 And Vengeance is a dish best eaten cold.

The Pleasures of Faults

I love your imperfections. The rough spot
 Upon each elbow shows how soft your skin
 Is otherwise; your eyelashes are thin
And cannot veil the fact your eyes are not
Exact twins in their size; that so-called blot
 Gives me two different faces to gaze in,
 Depending how you turn; your mind's quick spin
Is stranger to a philosophic thought,
But thrills me with each shocking, graceful bound
 To negate Nietzsche and confound Montaigne.
 Ideals exist, but only to supply
Something for us to vary from. Profound
 Perfection can't be seen without a stain
 To capture and command the blasé eye.

History Lesson

Columbus sailed the ocean blue
In 1492.
The natives met eternity
In 1493.

Surrender

The microscope he would not set aside
Is blurred with dust: he will no longer look
Into the depths of drops; the yellowed book
In which he tracked his restless reason's stride
Wherever nature's secrets chose to hide
Lies in the darkest corner of a nook;
The chessboard near the window lacks a rook;
The pens are broken, and the ink has dried.

Oh, thinking wears one out. It starves the heart
To see a truth fade like a dying child
Gripped by a fever. Easier to be
With eyes closed, ears stopped up, safe from the dart
Of painful, pointless questioning—unriled,
Relaxed, resigned, turned from eternity.

Albumblätter

Come here by the water, we'll sit in the shade.
The sun in the leaves makes you look like jade.
Remember the wooing of a youth and a maid?
If you don't remember, I'll tell you again
Of how two lovers met and parted, and then
Met once more, and toyed with each other's feelings,
The way young folk do, as if loves were foolings
And not more than blood and breath to the body.
But after their plays and their coys they were ready
And pledged themselves married before God and Law.
The young man and woman set on life and saw
Their youth clot and crumble without even trying
To stop it, or slow it, or ease its soft dying.
At last, without noticing or even sighing,
They found themselves happy and quiet and old.
He found in his late years new joys the world held.
But the love of his life found her memories grown dim.
Sometimes she lost track of herself or of him,
And sometimes she hurt herself without even knowing,
And sometimes she wept for fear of his going,
Then ten minutes after he'd soothed her with a promise
Weep once again in rage at his presence.
Still, day followed day with more she'd forgotten.
He tended her, cared for her, led her unbidden,
Long past any promise alone would have held him.
Remember the wooing of a youth and a maid?
The water's grown chilly. Let's go out of the shade.
It's bright still, and warm, and you won't be afraid.

The Lament of a Friend of Lycius

In response to the *Lamia* of Keats

Sage Apollonius, when you joined the feast
And saw your student wed to his dear beast—
The lovely beast whom all there called a queen
Of beauty, but whom you judged as obscene—
Old Apollonius, with your gray beard curled,
Did you pause to consider at all before you hurled
Your curse on the dear serpent made a wife
How your cold honesty might end his life?
Before you glared, before you spoke to break
Her magic, which he loved, or reached to rake
The human mask from her too human eyes,
Did you, wise man, question what you call wise?
Or did you act, secure that what you knew
Was true, and all that any could call true?

O Apollonius, I know well your kind:
The moral-preachers, proud, of settled mind,
Determined to enforce what they call truth,
As rapt in their opinion as our youth
Was rapt by beauty and a monster's love.
Is this the certitude you thought well of?
And were you sure that you alone were right?
And have you wept for what you did that night?
If thus you did without a thought before—

But if you thought, your murder chills me more.

You mage, philosopher, who understood
That all's illusion, you of all men should
Have known the danger of illusion's end.

When all is pretense, what harm to pretend?
If all is built on falsehood, why destroy
The one sweet lie that gave our Lycius joy?
Yet was she not true woman in his sight?
And was she not true lover on that night?
We think we are life's masters: life denies.
We think we rule ourselves: passion replies.
We think we're free: illusion's dearly bought.
We think we think: who can define a thought?
But you, so righteous, gave your notions power
To blast the serpent hidden in the flower,
And so destroyed our Lycius. Was his sin
So foul? And is your truth's mercy so thin?
Did your truth revel in Lycius' last breath?
Was your truth worth so much, worth even his death?

O Apollonius, sage, I pray you, bend
Your haughty brow to hear his grieving friend.
Must one who makes no claim to wisdom preach
The human truth to one who lives to teach?
Illusion's our breath, blood, our very lives.
And fickle truth is armed with dangerous knives.
It changes shape to conquer each man's thought,
A row of pretty masks, each masking—what?
Yet if it stills the questions that we ask,
We will embrace and be glad of the mask.
Philosopher, who blasted with a glance,
Could you not once be moved to tolerance?
Could his pale face, could her tears not impart
A moment's understanding in your heart?
You honest, ruthless servant of the real,
You never yet your own true truth could feel:
Whatever spell they cast to fool the eye,
Some monsters are too dear to us to die.

The Goddesses of Rage

*From the dark underworld
Home of the Furies, she aroused Allecto,
Grief's drear mistress, with her lust for war,
For angers, ambushes, and crippling crimes.*
—Aeneid, VII, 323-326, trans. Fitzgerald

Restless Allecto slavers for the corpse
Of Peace and pulls at holy Juno's grip
Like some blood-maddened hound. Untamed as yet
Beneath Minerva's oaths and briberies
Of honored domesticity and small
Home sacrifices, she bays for the feast
Of turmoil and the roiling steam of war.
Her raging summons all her foreign sisters,
Who range themselves to cheer the coming slaughter:
Eris, who joys in seeing warriors fall
Under their comrades' spears; skull-girdled Kali,
Her teeth filed sharp, her tresses dripping gore,
Spinning curved blades in her hundred hands,
And her maid Shurpanakha, blazing-eyed,
A demon silly for the taste of flesh;
From eastern mountains comes old Baba Yar
With giant strides in her enchanted boots,
Slathered with fat of murdered babes to speed
Her step, grinning and cackling at the hope
Of carnage to fill her wide skirts with prey;
The northern mistress of beauty and of love,
Frosty Freya, mistress, too, of death—

She gathers half the slain of every war
And sets the murdered heroes in her hall
Against the last day when she rallies them
To guard her throne against the Wolf's advance;
Even black-winged Raven from the western lands
Hears, flies the ocean to attend the sight
Of treaties broken and weak Peace dismembered.
Only Hela, pale keeper of the dead,
Hoar-rimed, eternal, stays in her dark den,
Immovable as its rough-hewn stone walls.
She has no need to witness foolish men
Destroying one another for no cause:
All deeds she knows, those done, those yet to come.
She knows full well the earth's futility.
Allecto howls her sisters welcome, bows
The honor due them, whimpers to run wild.
Juno, the ox-eyed queen of upper earth,
Smiles with grim joy of her revenge so near.
And then, with an almost too graceful gesture,
Opens her hand, and sets the Fury free.

The Fair Repining Lass

She only wanted something special, different,
To touch the usual of her little life.
No grand wildness, but something all her own.

She took to frequenting the quiet corners
Removed from crowds, where she could be alone
To wait for that strangeness she longed to know.

The shadowed edges of the fields; the valleys
Filled white with fog; the blue behind the snow—
She watched for secrets in the hidden places.

The people of the town raised whispering talk
About their changeling child. They turned their faces
And told their beads whenever she passed by.

She'd rush on, unaware—her whole existence
Was fixed on what had not yet filled her eye—
To spots where she was sure the new must come.

One spring a vision of a golden glowing
Appeared above the town and struck all dumb.
The women knelt and prayed, the grown men wept,

But she was sitting in a distant cavern
Where soft-skinned salamanders, blind things, crept,
And only heard about the glorious sight.

Again, in autumn, soldiers came in marching
And dragged the young men off to make them fight
In war, leaving the mothers thin with grief,

While she sat in a grove of sapling maples,
Her breath so soft it did not stir the leaf
That hung in scarlet at her leaden cheek.

And still she waited, years she waited, faithful
To her sole heartfelt wish. She waited, meek,
Patient for wonders earth and time must give,

And never saw, for all her studious watching,
Her own denial, her own strange negative:
The strangeness of a life she would not live.

Life Map

searching for desperate answers
we are told in meditation class
to draw a life map to show us where
we've been and this facilitator
obviously hasn't heard of mcluhan
we are not the territory
so everyone looks at everyone else
to see what is expected and most
draw lines with dots on them
I am born I go to school I
have sex the first time
I screwed up here
someone draws a flow chart office
kind of guy but I am lost and my line
wanders questioning at corners
fouls the page with a tangle
like a sewage stream muddied
with glinting purple scum of
radioactive waste and old motor oil
where even the crawdads stifle
"You seem confused! That's great!
Revel in your confusion!"
I am so confused I haven't eaten
in three days because I can't
decide between chicken and granola
like a ball of old yarn the cat's
been at I suppose a quick tug at the right
point would unravel all and set it out
clean and geometrically exact

but where to pull? where to pull?
“See the beauty in the mess! It’s
modern art! Read into it what you must!”
like a kid with clouds it’s a horsey
a harley v-engine superhog
the curlicue just there looks like a butt
the rohrshach blot of my life

and that night my meditation-mate with
the deep green eyes says effeminately
“fuck the life map draw yourself a box
with one side wide wide open”
I do and sleep and dream of wide wide open

Little Songs

1.

I will be quiet and listen.
There is a song that busyness has drowned.
I will be quiet and listen
To whatever song may sound.

2.

A path begins at my feet,
A narrow path, unpaved, unpaced,
Bordered by a garden
That masks a desert waste.

If I will walk this way,
All other ways will be my ways.
If I stand or turn
The desert all my days.

3.

They take everything
And make it big,
So big that it has crushed them.
We must take it back
And make it small,
That we may hold it in our own hands.

4.

Now that we leave behind
The old idea of “either/or”,
We find a world of And and And and more.

5.

Without a word I found myself
Quite different than before.
I had not spoken, looked, or stood,
Or gone through any door.

But now the world was something else,
And life was yet another.
And I rejoiced, because it was
A day like any other.

6.

Against the tranquility of common sense
I propose
The wondering, jumbled glee of the immense
“Who knows?”

7.

A woman clothed with the sun
Stepped from behind a tree.
“Beware,” she said, “you will lose all
If you follow me.”

She vanished suddenly,
And the world was hollowed.
Without my taking a step
I had followed.

8.

Impossible for words to trap the meaning,
Impossible for you to hear from me.
Whichever way your sense of wonder’s leaning,
You yourself must see.

Gnomics

The wonders of the world
are the secrets we hide
from ourselves but hope
to hear others whisper.

Thus is born intrigue and submission.

Awe is a natural
response to suddenly
knowing something greater
than we think ourselves.

Thus is born worship and suspicious dread.

What we have chosen
to call reality
demands certain acts
to continue our existence.

Thus is born cruelty and the society of others.

The world is too simple
for us to understand
without intermediate
manufactured complexity.

Thus is born play and philosophy and symbol.

The order we attempt
to impose on the world
is belied by the world's
glorious redundancy.

Thus is born despair and the certainty of glee.

The desire for immortality
is a masculine desire
to have the certainty
of what women know.

Thus is born marriage and the crime of adultery.

All life's questions
come to how and why
and all life's thoughts
come to who and why.

Thus is born story and science and guilt.

Motion implies
space and time
and supposes the lie
of conscious purpose.

Thus is born sacrifice and desire for power.

To demand obedience
of existence
we lay stones and wood
in straight lines.

Thus is born architecture and time.

We recognize beauty
by a conjunction
of surprise, habit,
and memory.

Thus is born metaphor and cunning.

The realization
of the fact of infinity
refutes the solemnity
of endeavor.

Thus is born gaiety and calm.

Someone jokes
as someone mourns
as someone dances
as someone cries out.
Thus is born perspective and empathy.

In a dark space
we reach out our hand
to find a wall
but touch another searcher.
Thus is born religion and conversation.

If facts were stones
we would be proud
to know more
than we could carry.
Thus is born anxiety and vanity.

A vocabulary
presupposes audience
and dialogue
and even meaning.
Thus is born command and learning.

The world is not
overly concerned
with the human need
for consistency.
Thus is born frustration and systems of law.

We ride an escalator
and think ourselves smarter
than the women
who invented bread.
Thus is born satisfaction and contempt.

At the proper time
the absence of happiness
does not imply
the presence of sadness.
Thus is born logic and regret.

The illusion of happiness
is the last barrier
to the reality
of clear vision.
Thus is born wonder and stability.

Rational logic
and subconscious ponderings
and collective unconscious
are forms of thought.
Thus is born intuition and neuroses.

Rational logic
and subconscious ponderings
and collective unconscious
are not the only forms of thought.
Thus is born dichotomy and hesitation.

On the Sad Lack of Responsibility in Modern Life

Variation on a theme

Thyestes' sorry feast was not the first
Nor last to serve that sweet, forbidden meat;
Around the time this mythic faux pas burst
Upon the Greek scene (so I'm told) a fleet
Tribe called the Gauls were wont to slake their thirst
With their opponent's blood, and later eat
His heart, to swallow all the fellow's bravery:
Tacitus thought such custom common knavery.

Without surprise, then, but with fascination,
I read the other day about a team
Of lawyers in the middle of the nation,
Bland, law-abiding types, so it would seem,
Not one with any classical education,
Who carried *haute cuisine* to an extreme
By seizing, cooking, and devouring ten
Small children, two bored housewives, and four men.

Those used to television wouldn't curl
A hair to read this story someone filed
Of trussed-up neighbor boy and pigtailed girl
Who'd come to mow a lawn and mind a child
But stayed as entrées, dressed, served up with pearl
Potatoes poached and tossed with mushrooms wild.
But I admit that I was rather shaken
To see how few precautions they had taken.

How could five corporate lawyers and their wives
Be so baldly (and stupidly) depraved
As to buy cleavers, bone saws, sharpen knives
And feed upon their fellows? Ill-behaved,
To say the least. And badly planned, too. Lives
Were cut short without any scheme. Enslaved
By MTV's quick-cut inconsequence,
They acted wholly without common sense.

They even left the scraps at the back door
In Hefty bags, with cans and bottles blended.
It's their incompetence we must abhor,
Their utter lack of cunning that offended.
They only feasted sixteen times before
Authority discovered and descended.
By all the saints and the Archangel Michael,
Why didn't they remember to recycle?

The Change

I am become one of those great beasts
Dead unexpectedly instantly buried
Within a doomsday deluge of river clay
Readily waiting the intense pressure of time
The change from silt to stone
The change from meat to eternity
The light of discovery on a digger's sweaty face
Readily waiting the intense pressure of time
The change

My Grandmother

My grandmother's face has disappeared
behind a cloud of soft-edged wrinkles
so that it has an indistinct look
that makes it difficult for the nurses
to remember just who it is they tend.

My grandmother's eyes have disappeared
behind a cloud of soft-edged cataracts
so that she turns the wrong way when you sit with her
which makes it difficult to carry on a conversation
thinking she's smiling at someone just outside the room.

My grandmother's conversation has disappeared
behind a cloud of oft-repeated stories
and while she's not always sure whom she's enlightening
with anecdotes of a difficult long life
we're glad of the sharp detail of her recollection.

Poems in Ido

Ido (reformed Esperanto) is a constructed language intended to be used as an auxiliary language among those without a common tongue. It is easily learned, with a simplified grammar and a vocabulary drawn from French, English, German, Spanish, Italian, and Russian. The vowels are pronounced as in Italian; the consonants are pronounced generally as in English, except that *g* is always hard as in *gab*, and *c* is pronounced as *ts*.

Information and learning materials for Ido are available at <http://idolinguo.net> and <http://idolinguo.com>.

Facing literal translations of the poems are provided.

Averti

On dicas, ke me mustas evitar
L'ombroz foresto misterioz, ancien,
En qua raptema volfi guatas, strigi
Flug-falas, mem plu danjeroza bestii
Sennoma, nedicebla, vartas ta
Qua vagas blinde tra la obskureso.

On dicas, ke me mustas evitar
Ta old kastelo qua maligne squatas
Sur precipiso, ruinita, nigra,
En qua nun nur habitas la fantomi
Di ocidanti, guli qui hungregas
E kaptas irga folo temerara.

Evitez, anke dicas on, l'altaji
Di monti, ube vento-sturmo, nivo
Arachos vua frostigita anmo.
Evitez anke ya la profundaji
Tra qua grandega monstri natas, glitas,
E kolde tranas on adsub la ondi.

Ma sempre tentas men sekreta loki,
Obskur anguli, kozi nedomtita,
Imaginebla ma neatingebla.
E do me turnas me vers la foresto,
Kastelo, vers altaji, profundaji,
Adube mea dezirego guidas.

Warnings

They say that I should avoid
The shadowy, mysterious, ancient forest
Where ravenous wolves lurk, owls
Swoop, even more dangerous beasts
Unnamed, unspeakable, lie in wait
For one who wanders in the darkness.

They say that I should avoid
The old castle, which malignantly squats
Upon the precipice, ruined, black,
In which now dwell only the ghosts
Of murderers, ghouls who hunger for
And seize any reckless fool.

And avoid, they say, the heights
Of the mountains, where gales, snow
Will rip out your frozen soul.
And avoid the depths
Where huge monsters swim, slither,
And the waves coldly drag one down.

But secret places have always tempted me,
Unlit corners, untamed
Things, whatever is just out of reach.
And so I turn to the forest,
Castle, to the heights, the depths,
Wherever my yearning will lead.

La Regardato

Regardez aden mea verd okuli.
Pri me tu savas nun plu kam me ipsa.
L'iluziono di grand profundajo—
Dupigo di ta lumo. Tante mult anmo
Montrata ibe, ube esas nulo.

La vakueso dil abismo sempre
Atraktas ti qui mankas equilibrio.
Do kredez to quon tu nun en me vidas.
Regardez aden mea verd okuli,
Nam sen tu, mustas me serchar ul altru.

The One Watched

Look into my green eyes.
Now you know more of me than I do myself.
That illusion of great depth—
A trick of the light. So much soul
Shown where there is nothing.

The emptiness of the abyss always
Attracts those who lose their balance.
Believe this, trust what you see there.
Look into my green eyes,
For without you ... I must find someone else.

Laudo

Ha, tua krueleso delikata
 Incitas mea mento ad egardo.
 Me bone savas ke ne per hazardo
On facas tala lezo inspirata.
Sekar avida karno astonata,
 E sen varsar per tua poniardo
 Mem sango-guto, o pikar per dardo
La pronta kordio—stroko akurata!

Nur multa praktikado desfacila
 Dum multa yari, e dum mult amori,
 Ya facis tal maestro di horori.
E mea anmo fremisant, docila,
 Trovinte l' fonto di ta bel angori,
Nun vartas tua manui tre habila.

Praise

Ah, your delicate cruelty
Excites my mind and respect.
I know well it's not by chance
That one makes such inspired injury.
To slice eager, astonished flesh,
And without spilling with your dagger
Even a drop of blood—or pierce with a dart
The ready heart—that's an masterstroke!
Only lots of difficult practice
Through many years, through many loves,
Makes such a maestro of horrors.
And my trembling heart, docile,
Having found the font of this beautiful agony,
Now awaits your so skillful hands.

Libereso

La suno celas su dop ula nubo
La luno levas su de dop acero
Nun esas nula vento, nul venteto
Pasero twitas, vespo preterflugas
Un folio de lilac-arbusto falas
Formiki pasas kom la nura eko
Dil grav bruiso di la granda mondo

Freedom

The sun hides itself behind a cloud
The moon rises from behind a tree
There is no wind, no breeze
A bird sings, a hornet flies by
One leaf from the lilac falls
Ants pass as the only echo
Of the grave bustle of the great world

La Submisanto

Ho, venez, prenez me, konsume me.
Me esas friandajo a tua boko,
Dolceso e saleso en un loko
Por tentar tua lango. E dum ke
Tu mordas aden mea karno e
Drinketas mea sango—it'a poko
Restanta—ho, ne facez irga moko.
Me pregas, no, ne mokez me. Nam se

Tu havas omna povo, ita povo
Glutar sensucie ca mizera ento,
Quankam tu kredas tote lo kontrea,
Komprenez: Me incitas singla movo,
Yes, mem desprizo, kom la instrumento
Por prenar tu e facar tu la mea, mea.

The Submissive

Oh come, take me, consume me.
I am a delicacy for your mouth,
Sweetness and saltiness in one place
To tempt your tongue. And while

You bite into my flesh and
Sip my blood—the little
Remaining—oh, make no joke.
Please, no, don't mock me. For if

You have so much power, that power
 To swallow thoughtlessly this miserable thing,
 Although you wholly believe the opposite,
Know this: I incite your every move,
 Yes, even disgust, as the tool
 To take you and make you mine, mine.

Parolar

Parolez a me. Ne per la okuli.
Okuli sempre mentias pro esperi,
esperi mea. Parolez a me anme,
per vorti, qui kavalkas sur respiro.

Respiro esas ya la vera anmo.
La ancieni savis lo, nomizis
la anmo por respiro. Esez anmo,
ta anmo qua respiras sua amo.

Nam inter du la vorti es konspiro
en spiro di aspiro ed expiro,
ed omna vorti celas signifiko
quan du asignas, e nur du komprenas

ek pulso di intenco ed ek tiro
di interpreto. To es konversado:
spirala instrumento, ma la nura
por renversar desfido. Do, parolez.

Ed en ed sur ed inter l'omna vorti
ni flugos ed konocos ed eniros
la una aden l'altra. Ni respiros
per una respirado nia anmi.

Speaking

Speak to me. Not with the eyes.
The eyes always lie because of hopes,
my hopes. Speak to me with the soul,
with words, which ride on the breath.

Breath is indeed the soul.
The ancients knew it, they named
The soul after the breath. Be soul,
That soul that breathes its love.

For, between two, words are a conspiracy
in breath of inhaling and exhaling,
and all words hide a meaning
only two make, only two understand

from the push of intention and the pull
of interpretation. That's conversation:
a spiral tool, but the only thing
to reverse confusion. So speak.

And in and on and between all words
we will fly and will know and will enter
one another. We will breathe
With one breath of our souls.

Reliquii

Ube l' kavalo? Ube l' kavalkanto?
Ube la brido per qua on direktis?
Ube la voyo? Ube la marchanto?
Ube la pedi per qui li delektis?
Polvo restas, e ne memoras.

Ube la segi? Ube la maristi?
Ube la navi quin uli menuzis?
Ube la digo? Ube l' masonisti?
Ube l' torenti quin uli inkluzis?
Aquo fluas, e ne memoras.

Ube la vorti? Ube la skribanti?
Ube l' savaji quin la frazi portis?
Ube l' kansono? Ube la kantanti?
Ube l' muziko qua bele exhortis?
Vento suflas, e ne memoras.

Relics

Where the horse? Where the rider?
Where the bridle, the grass that nourishes?
Where is the way? Where the walker?
Where the feet that make one real?
Dust remains, and does not remember.

Where the ship? Where the sailor?
Where the sea that gives them worth?
Where the dike? Where the mason?
Where the flood they gather and bind?
Water flows, and does not remember.

Where the words and their writers?
Where the knowledge their phrases carry?
Where the song? Where the singers?
Where the music that beautifully demands?
Wind blows, and does not remember.

Sonjo perdita

Jemado en noktala obskureso.
Me vekas, turnas me quik pro teroro,
Ma tu ankore dormas. Ka pavoro
Afliktas ta repozo? Ta paleso,
Grimaso montras ula perturbeso.
Quala inkubo, falio, o rankoro,
Quala restaĵo mala di memoro,
Olima dezirego o tristeso
Nun jenas tu, quon me nultempe savis?
 Quon me nultempe savis ... Pluse quo?
 Quon plusa me ne savas pri tu? Fola
Ideo, ma ... Ka me nultempe havis,
 Nultempe tote havos tu? E do ...
 Nun esos nulo ma la nokto sola.

A lost dream

A groaning in the night's darkness.
I awake, quickly turn in terror,
But you're still sleeping. What pain
Touches your repose? That pallor,
Grimace show some trouble.
What nightmare, failure, or anger,
What bad leavings of memory,
Long-gone yearning or sadness
Now troubles you, that I never knew of?
That I never knew of ... and what else?
What else do I not know about you? Crazy
Idea, but ... Have I never had,
Will I never really have you? And so ...
Now there is nothing but lonely night.

Vovo

Do esas nia stato renversita,
E la populi bestii divenita.
Ankore ni staceskos e laboros,
Ankore agos, dicos, mem ardoros
Docar til ula dio, ul epoko,
Til ero kande ca jemanta loko
Forjetos sua nuna dementeso
E perdos ca sangoza maladeso.

Vow

Now is our country overturned
And our people become beasts.
Still we will stand and work,
Still we will act, and speak, and be ardent
To teach, until some day, some epoch,
Some era when this groaning place
Will throw out our current insanity
And lose this bloody illness.

Poetry

Poetry. It's just another game
we play to pass the time. A little more interesting
than solitaire, if anyone else reads it—
double solitaire, with the back and forth
on each other's decks. Maybe if we
had enough friends to sit across the table
every day we'd never write. Or maybe
we like invisible players with their own cards.
We'll never know what jacks she's putting down
on our intended queens, or if she's only
noticing that three of clubs we dropped
without thinking—a touch of excitement
to fool the usual rolling hours. Poetry
has fooled a lot of time, and fouled some more,
but we keep playing with the fervor of athletes,
making rules, dropping rules, writing new rules,
casting off all rules with self-righteous sneers.
Let's not forget a game's supposed to be fun.

